Reverie

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Gale "Buck" Cleven, John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Original Female Character(s), Ken Lemmons, Original Male Character(s), Marge (Masters of the Air), Bernard "Benny" DeMarco, Charles "Crank" Cruikshank, Howard "Hambone" Hamilton, John Brady (Masters of the Air), Alexander Jefferson (1921-2022)

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Reverie

by Avonne

Summary

In a universe where soulmates share dreams, Bucky finds the way to Gale's soul.

Notes

I'm very excited to post this! We start at the beginning of episode 5, when Bucky thinks he lost Gale. As the rating indicates, we'll have some explicit scenes eventually. Please brace yourself for some dreamspace surreality! :)

Cover art by moontashpena ❤

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 【授翻】Reverie by MeiyangWeiyang

Chapter 1

The landscape around Bucky is scorched. Clouds of smoke obscure the sky and the ground seems to cave in under his feet as he tears through the familiar valley in search of a glimpse of blue. Where's the house, the flutter of laundry, the toothpicks? To his right, the river's once beloved waves darken into motor oil. He stumbles and falls on his hands and knees, and the earth pools around his limbs like molasses, swallows them into its burning binds.

“Buck!” Bucky cries out. Pungent sulfur fills his lungs. “Gale!”

He keeps sinking, down into the depths of hell, and he can’t move a muscle anymore. Metallic fear floods his mouth. Death feels inevitable, and he can’t breathe. No, Gale isn’t here anymore, he’s gone, and in his absence, Bucky's fate is catching up to him. Men like him may soar high but when it's time to settle their accounts, they pay with their souls. His soul, now gone. His heart stutters in a desperate bid to keep him going, but flames bite into his body and the river roars -

He wakes up with a gasp. He's in Thorpe Abbotts, and Gale - he’s gone. The fact slams into him anew, as if his mind just refused to process it the first time around, but now that he forced himself to sleep, he knows. Raindrops glisten on the nose of the fort whose cockpit he’s sitting in. He can’t even remember which one it is. Some deluded part of him felt that this was the closest he could get to Gale. He thought - well, it doesn’t matter anymore. The state of their dream landscape was confirmation enough.

All shaky like a goddamn replacement after his first mission, he lights a cigarette and stares at the flat, empty fields of the base without seeing any of it. Bugs bounce off the plane's metal as they flit around in the weak sunlight. He should get himself together. But to hell with sobriety when it hollows him out like this. A hangover dances on the tail of his lingering drunkenness. Who cares anymore? What does a clear mind matter when there’s a hole in his chest the size of a bomb crater?

He's still panting through his nose, but he squeezes the metal of his flask tight and tips all that's left in it into his mouth. Numbness fogs up his mind. Welcome. It had better take it all. Wash it away. The

only feeling he needs is the hunger for vengeance.

He can’t go to sleep ever again.

He can pass out, drink himself into a coma. Be knocked out. Have his fucking head blown off. But he will never allow himself to dream again.

Gale is gone.

They say dreamwalking starts where childhood ends. Something about maturity and pathways between brain cells. There are countless books about it, but Bucky likes his momma's explanation the most. *The soul needs to settle first,* that's how she used to put it when he was about ten and oh-so-smitten with every girl around his age. He would ask them out on dates and hold their hands, then run home and nap to see if anything changed. But all his crushes fizzled out within a few weeks, because at the time, he wouldn’t accept anything less than his soulmate. None of the girls he met appeared in any of his dreams. He was impatient - some of his classmates already had their first shared dreams and he was desperate to catch up. To trade stories or keep his own coy secrets, be in on the joke that everyone was so excited to discover. But his dreams stayed disappointingly his own.

Growing up, he was intrigued by the prospect of walking into another person's dreams. Ever since his mom read the Tale of Wandering Souls to him, elaborate fantasies of his dream girl took root in his head. She'd be fierce and quiet, brave, smart. Blond as an angel. She'd always like his jokes and would never cry, because Bucky hated the sound of sniffling. If there was someone out there meant for him, he was sure she'd be like that.

He knew that finding her could go a couple different ways. In the Wandering Souls, there were people who had met before their shared dreams started and they would end up in the same landscape immediately. Others would fall in love in their dreams and would guide each other through life until they met in the real world. But, although he was only ten and not exactly mature about these things, Bucky had already realized that his story wouldn’t be that smooth. His mom told him that everyone left pieces of themselves in their soulmate's dreams, with or without intention. All one had to do was

pull on the clues like a thread of yarn and follow them to the other half of their soul. That, he figured, was what he had to do. Even if the clues were hard to find, he wouldn't rest until he got them. It would be worth it in the end, he told himself.

When he was fourteen and kissing girls began to sound more interesting than pulling their pigtails, his resolution lost the wind from its sails. No matter how much he worked on finding clues and leaving some of his own, it was like throwing glass at a brick wall. So he decided he didn't care about the nonsense of soulmates anymore. It was such an intangible concept anyway, and he knew that a lot of people never found who belonged to them. Some met the other half of their soul and it ruined their lives. Others ruined it on their own by obsessing over it. No, thank you. Bucky had big plans to enjoy all that life had to offer, without regrets, hangups or compromise. He didn't need a soulmate. He was popular enough without one.

He can still remember that when he explained this to his mom, she stroked his hair and smiled in that infuriating, fond way of hers that made Bucky feel like a kid. "She must be younger than you, baby. Give her time."

By God, she was right.

Bucky's soulmate was not only younger than him but reserved and slow to settle. It was a month before Bucky's seventeenth birthday when the first signs appeared. Bucky didn't even notice them at first. It just amused him how, in the endless hunger that came with the growth spurt he was going through, he kept dreaming of Hershey bars. But strangely enough, when he woke up, it was never chocolate that he craved. He shrugged it off. Life went on. Thousands of things seemed more important than his weird sleep hunger.

Then, on one of those warm summer nights, the damn chocolate just appeared in the grass beside him in a dream about his family's backyard. Curious, he picked it up. It was the first time that he touched one of the Hershey bars, but he didn't think much about it as he turned it around in his hand. Not until he looked down and saw that in its place, now a cornflower bloomed. He could swear that it wasn't there before.

He plucked it.

From that moment, the memory of his dream blurs, but some details remain bright and colourful in his mind. He remembers that he

lurched forward as if snapped out of place by a rope pulling tight, and suddenly, he found himself standing by a log house on an unfamiliar riverbank. A bare mountain top loomed in the distance, grey rocks beyond the pine trees. Fluffy white clouds swam across the blue sky. The air felt crispy-fresh, and cornflowers covered the grass like scattered confetti.

Although in the dream, Bucky's mind didn't put two and two together, he still felt a gust of excitement and curiosity. He was looking around in awe of the landscape when he heard the flutter of laundry being hanged outside to dry. A gut feeling gripped him - he was not alone. But who was it then? He approached the log house cautiously. What was he going to find there? A nightmare or a blessing?

He saw the blinding white of clean clothes first, and the sunshine as it slipped through the gaps in the fabric and split into warm rays. The smell of detergent wafted in the air. He pulled a damp shirt off its rope and came face to face with a boy he didn't know.

The boy put his hands on his hips and nodded at him. “What took you so long?”

Bucky woke up immediately.

Sitting up in his bed, he shivered as cold sweat dried on his neck. He tried to calm his erratic breathing while his mind was racing with the realization - he had dreamwalked. He did it! He had given up on it so long before that he couldn't believe that it finally happened. He had pushed into his soulmate's dream and found him. He had a soulmate!

A spark of joy burst in his chest. He barked a laugh, felt it spread in his heart like honey. But a moment later, the feeling gave way to sudden, overwhelming disappointment. Without memories from real life, the brain can only retain impressions and none of the distinct details. So no matter how he racked his mind, Bucky couldn't recall what his soulmate looked like. He didn’t have a name, a face or a voice, but he had an essence, and that told Bucky one thing crystal clear - his soulmate was a boy.

How was that possible? Bucky had no interest in boys. The idea of kissing one revolted him. It didn’t sound like a natural thing but a ticket to jail or worse. It wasn't unheard of to have a platonic

soulmate, of course, but Bucky had always thought that his bond would be the most romantic thing in the world. That it would be a relationship for the ages. He had vowed that the only person he would marry was the other half of his soul. The certainty that it would never happen depressed him. He had to do something about it.

Still shaken by the experience, he got up and snuck out of the house to clear his head. The streets were dark and quiet as he roamed aimlessly around the neighbourhood. Where the street lights were burnt out, only the sharp silver of the moon cast light on the pavement, and left him with a blurry, lanky shadow. He wondered if that was the image of him that his soulmate would wake up with come morning. He wondered if the boy was scared. If he expected a petite girl instead. Already at nigh seventeen, he was tall and broad, and what he could recall from his dream told him that his soulmate only came up to his shoulders. Just a kid, really. And he had the cheek to tell Bucky he had taken too long? The more Bucky thought about it, the less he wanted to deal with it. Perhaps, he mused, he could just ignore it for the rest of their lives. Ward his mind somehow, conceal his unintentional clues.

Kicking a rock in front of him, he headed back home. He had a lot of reading to do.

It took two afternoons at the library and one sleepless night before Bucky abandoned the plan to shut his soulmate out. It was too much work, and all the books described it as an excruciatingly painful process that had the potential to be permanent. He never claimed to be a saint, but doing the torture the books described to some thirteen-year-old whose only crime was taking the place of Bucky's imagined future wife, well, that just seemed cruel. So, the second night after their first shared dream, Bucky resigned himself to being as nice as possible and went to sleep.

This time, his mind took him directly to the log house. He wondered if it was a real place out there. Did it come from his soulmate's mind or was it something they created together? If it was his soulmate's imagination, why did they have to meet there and not in one of Bucky's dreams? He didn't know how that worked, but his curiosity to find out more began to return.

Nothing seemed to have changed in the landscape. The river streamed down the valley cheerfully, rolling pebbles down from the blue depths

of the peak in the distance. Clothes fluttered on their lines in the summer breeze. A horse grazed on the hill behind the log house. As Bucky approached it, he spotted a figure lying on his back in the tall grass, a long blade of it in his mouth, his arms crossed under his head. When Bucky's shadow slid over his face, the kid cracked his eyes open. He looked amused.

“Did I scare you last time?”

“Scare me?” Bucky snorted. “Pipsqueak like you?”

The boy stood up and gave him a once-over. He hummed. “I could take you in a fight.”

That made Bucky laugh out loud. “Sure, buddy.”

Something in his demeanor seemed to have put his soulmate more at ease. He smiled. “Are you gonna stick around this time?”

A rueful sigh escaped Bucky's lips as he glanced around. “I suppose.” He jerked his chin at the boy. “What's your name?”

“You’ll forget it come morning.”

It was true - dream memories were elusive like that. It would feel like the name was on the tip of his tongue, and he could guess but would never find it with certainty until they met in the real world. Bucky nodded in contemplation. He still wanted to hear the name though. “I won't forget how it made me feel.”

The boy's unaffected air cracked at that, giving away a hint of just how excited he really was about meeting Bucky. True to what they expected, the name didn't stick in Bucky's mind once he woke up, but as he reminisces about it now, he can imagine Gale's measured little voice saying it like he always does. “I'm Gale Cleven.”

Bucky thinks he must have given Gale a pitying look at that. “Nah, that can’t be right. What kind of name is that anyway? You need a nickname.”

He threw his arm around Gale's shoulders and attempted to give him a noogie, but Gale was too agile and wriggled out of his grip. “I don’t like nicknames.”

“Tough luck, kid. You’re stuck with the *king* of nicknames.”

“King of horseshit.” Gale fired back as they continued to wrestle.

Bucky laughed at him again. Some of his reservations about having a boy as his soulmate started to dissipate. It was more fun than he expected to banter and roughhouse with someone instead of playing Romeo every night. In retrospect, that probably would have driven him insane. He couldn't have had a better soulmate than Gale.

Alone in the cold cockpit, Bucky lights another cigarette to numb his pain.

He remembers that he ended up pushing Gale over in that dream and grinning down at him as Gale glared. His expression reminded him of a classmate he had in Manitowoc. “I'm gonna call you Buck.”

“I hate it.”

Bucky threw Gale's words back at him. “You’ll forget it come morning.”

Gale kicked him, even though a smile played about his lips. “I won't forget how it made me feel!”

After that night, things smoothed out between them quickly. They hit it off right away after Bucky got past his initial freakout. He started looking forward to their shared dreams with anticipation. The feeling that a mistake had been made evaporated - somehow, his mind knew that the match was right. And how could it not be? It was all biology. Or God's will, if one chose to believe in that. He enjoyed every minute with Gale, getting to know him even if he forgot most of it as soon as he woke up. They had a blast together. And as Gale's body began to catch up to his brilliant mind, Bucky started to feel like he had a partner for life. He didn't think he could pick Gale out from a crowd because his memory was still all blurry and transient, but he had a good grasp on the shape of his soul. Was that what having an imaginary friend felt like?

He never told his mom. It just didn't feel right. On one hand, he didn't want to see the same disappointment that plagued him at first too. On the other, he felt an odd possessiveness about anything that had to do with Gale. What they had was theirs and theirs alone.

He was about nineteen and Gale sixteen when he brought up the one thing that bothered him since the day they first dreamwalked together.

“Is there any way to change this place?” He asked as they skipped rocks on a nearby lake whose dark blue surface glittered in the sunshine. “It’s boring, Buck. I wanna go dancing.”

Those days, that was all he wanted to do. Dance with pretty girls, drink, kiss plump lips until his own were smeared ruby-red with their lipstick. Touch them under their blouses, hook his hand under a thigh.

Buck weighed the pebbles in his palm. He was tall enough to match Bucky by then, but his limbs looked thin and delicate. “I don’t like to dance.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “You just don’t like fun.”

“There are other ways to have fun.” Buck winked at him, and Bucky remembers how he felt his whole body flush.

That was something new and frightening. He never had a sex dream while dreamwalking before, and he wasn't planning on having one either. Whenever something like that happened, he bailed out as quickly as his mind allowed. It was only since he lost his virginity that his brain wired everything even remotely flirty down south. Apparently, Gale's jokes were no exception to that either. Bucky tried to shake it off, turn back to the topic at hand.

“What's the deal with those clothes you fuss over every night?” He asked. At that point, he thought of Gale every time he smelled laundry detergent on wet fabric.

Gale threw a pebble, watched it skip and sink, then another. Something dark ran across his face. “I don’t like dirty clothes.”

Bucky didn't know what else to say, so he just huffed. “So is this all in *your* mind?”

“Yep.” Gale said without hesitation.

Bucky's eyebrows rose. “What, you knew this all along?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t we ever go to my dreams then?”

“Do you want me in your mind?”

Bucky opened his mouth but the words refused to come out. A defensive instinct stirred in his chest.

“Thought so.” Gale said calmly. There was a simple, placid strength in his voice that Bucky didn't remember noticing before. It felt as though their ages had been switched, as if Gale held a wisdom that reached beyond either of their years.

“It’s not like that.” Bucky protested.

“Is it not?”

Gale's aloof behaviour annoyed him. “You can’t blame me, you’re not exactly -”

“What you wanted?”

“You’re *not someone I can marry.”*

Gale closed his eyes for a long moment, the first time he showed that the conversation cut into him just as deeply as it did into Bucky. He threw the last of his pebbles into the lake. “We could still be best friends.”

Bucky swallowed. “We are.”

“If we are -” Gale looked at him. Although Bucky has no memory of his face at the time, his mind fills the gaps with everything he knows about Gale now. The blues of his eyes in a warm afternoon glow, the dark line of his eyelashes, his pouty mouth. “- don’t you want to find me?”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

Gale opened his arms and gestured around. They stared at each other for a long moment before Bucky hung his head and sighed. “Geography isn’t my strong suit.”

The defeated tone in his voice made Gale chuckle. The sound resonated in Bucky's heart, and a new wave of heat rushed down his spine. He had to get away before he embarrassed himself. He grinned and shoved at Gale's shoulder, pleased when Gale pushed him back.

He pointed his index finger at Gale. “Okay, Buck. Here's the plan. You’ll come to me next time and I'll show you what real fun is like.”

“Don’t count on it!” Gale grinned, pulled his shirt off and took off into the water. It was sheer luck that Bucky’s alarm dragged him away from that sight before he could follow.

He didn't know how difficult it was to anchor his dream to one location until Gale started to venture into his mind. Each night they dreamwalked, Bucky wanted to show him everything at once, wanted to see him out of his element or in places where he had never been, but they ended up just switching between dreamscapes half a dozen times before going back to Gale's recurring dream. He still struggled with that when he turned twenty-one, but he refused to give up and let Gale have one up on him. He tried and failed to set their dream landscape time and again.

“That was fun.” Gale said after a botched attempt, his voice amused and suddenly much deeper than Bucky ever recalled it being. He wished, not for the first time, that he knew what he sounded like in the real world.

Bucky groaned, his vision blurry as all the jumbled dreams swirled around in his mind. “You’re a little shit.”

It took him by surprise when a hard body collided with him and toppled him over until he was spread out on the soft, familiar grass, his wrists caught in a vice-tight grip and pinned to the ground above his head. Gale hovered over him on all fours. “Not so little anymore.”

Bucky felt his breath catch in his throat. A fever ran down his spine and moved back up to spread its wings in his chest. It had been too long since he had a steady girl, he figured, and there are fewer barriers when one dreams - it wasn't Gale who had that effect on him, it was a simple biological response. He shook his head, and the sensation went away. With a quick twist of his legs, he pushed Gale out of balance and flipped them around.

He grinned down at Gale's flushed face. “I'm still a better wrestler though.”

He talked to Gale about his girlfriends and escapades almost every day, usually to receive some noncommittal hums and nods in reply. It never went beyond that, it was just an easy way to share all that had been constantly on Bucky's mind during college. Gale never talked about the people he fancied. He watched Bucky and smiled each time Bucky joked or told him about his latest mishap at school. It went on for years and years, until it almost seemed like Gale wasn't interested in sex at all. Until, on a cold night a few days before Gale turned twenty-one, he got real quiet and didn't respond to anything Bucky said to him about the subject.

"What's wrong?" Bucky asked. They were in his dorm room, sitting on the bed - it looked neater in his dream than in reality. No clothes strewn on the floor, to avoid the irritated little frown Gale used to have at the sight. The window was open, but the dreamscape allowed them not to feel the cold as snow fell outside in fat, languid flakes. He nudged Gale's shoulder.

Gale looked at him with a blank look, then at the window again. A muscle tightened in his jaw. "I had sex with a girl."

At the time, Bucky couldn't figure out why, but his heart plummeted. If he thinks back now, he wants to slap his young self for being so oblivious, so resistant to the pull of the feelings between them. Maybe, if he hadn't acted like that, they could have had more time together. He could have told Gale he loved him earlier, and Gale would have believed him. But it didn't happen like that. Bucky pinches the bridge of his nose to keep the tears at bay. It didn't happen the way it should have.

In that terrible dream, he clapped Gale on the back and forced a grin on his face. "Better late than never."

Gale pulled his knees up and leant back against the wall. His socked toes curled against the mattress. He was looking at Bucky as if he wanted him to save him from something but Bucky didn't realize what it was. He thought he needed help to open up. He thought all Gale needed was encouragement.

"So? How was it?"

"It was -" Gale looked like he was in pain but wanted to hide it. "- as it ought to be, I suppose."

Bucky laughed quietly and mirrored Gale's pose until they sat shoulder to shoulder, watching the snow fall. Something in him hurt too, but he

brushed it aside. He had conversations like this in real life. He could handle one with his soulmate, for Christ's sake. “Come on now. Don’t be a prude. What was she like?”

Gale crossed his arms. “Kind.”

Despite the lingering discomfort, Bucky felt a burst of warm fondness at the word. “No, Buck, was she blond? Brown? Curvy? Thin? Did she make you feel good?”

He turned his head to see Gale's face, and Gale looked at him too. Bucky can’t remember what his eyes looked like at that moment, even though he wishes he did because then his mind would stop torturing him by imagining them wet or red-rimmed. He's sure that Gale didn't cry but every time he thinks of the memory, it feels like his soul did.

“She’s blond.” Gale said eventually. “Her name is Marge.”

Bucky hummed. “Are you going steady with her?”

When Gale nodded, he patted Gale's thigh, and they continued watching the white winter sky in silence until their connection broke for the night. Bucky spent the next morning in the foolest mood known to mankind.

When the war broke out and the first news about the Germans hit the papers, Bucky didn't have a morsel of doubt that it was time for him to show what he was made of. He had nothing to lose. He was strong and resilient, had no fear of death and no wife and kids to worry about. He wanted to fight. For those who couldn't, for those who tried and failed, for the kind of world he loved, for a future he wanted - so he joined up as soon as he had a chance.

Everything happened like a whirlwind after that. He was sent to Texas to be a flying cadet, joining men from all over the States. He can barely remember half of the people he met that first day at Randolph Field, even though some of them would go on to serve with him later, but he will never forget the moment he stepped into the barrack and laid his eyes on Gale.

He was skinny and golden-blond, still not quite at ease in his uniform

but already exuding such calm that some of the more antsy cadets flocked to him. He was leaning against a bunk bed, the light in his blue eyes bright as he nodded along to whatever the fellas beside him rambled on about. They laughed nervously at something and he offered them a polite, amused smile. Bucky couldn't recognise him. He didn't fit into his blurry dream memories immediately like a puzzle piece, but there was a magnetic pull that drew Bucky to him, something beyond conscious thought or instinct.

He walked up to Gale as casually as he could manage. "Hey. I think we haven't met before."

Gale looked him up and down. "Indeed."

"Pleased to meet you, buddy." He held out a hand. "John Egan, Bucky."

"Gale Cleven."

As their hands slipped into each other in a firm, warm shake, déjà vu skittered down Bucky's nerves. He flashed Gale a cheeky smile. "Nah, that can't be right. You need a nickname."

A confused frown appeared between Gale's eyebrows. "Do I?"

Bucky felt his mouth go dry. Could it be? His heart raced. Thousands of dreams shared, memories he couldn't keep and ones he held onto like postcards from a long-lost friend, touches he never felt in real life flitted across his mind. He wasn't sure, but life would be boring if one never took any risks, wouldn't it? He went for it.

"You look like my friend from Manitowoc, called Buck."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do." He grinned. "You sure do."

That night was one of the most nerve-wracking ones of his life. He could barely get himself to fall asleep. What if he had misjudged it? What if he went down, followed Buck's usual clues but didn't find who he thought he would on the other side? He tossed and turned and breathed in deep until exhaustion finally pushed him to sleep.

The river seemed to sing to him when he made it to their usual

dreamscape. Birdsong came from the treeline, laundry fluttered in the wind by the log house. The sunshine felt warmer than usual on his face, and even the tall peak in the distance seemed less formidable than before.

“Buck!” He called out, jogging towards the house, but he stopped in his tracks when the curtain of clean clothes parted to reveal a face he finally, after all those years, *recognised.*

Gale's lips split into the biggest grin Bucky had ever seen. “I knew it was you!”

His voice had a form at last. A representation in Bucky's mind. It was just as deep and warm as he always imagined, and at that moment, he wished he could spend the rest of his life listening to it. He crossed the distance between them in a few quick steps and gripped Gale's shoulders with both of his hands.

“You pretty son of a bitch.” He shook his head, grinning, and pulled Gale into a bone-crushing hug.

“Get off me.” Gale laughed. “What kind of friend are you, huh? Giving me your own name.”

Bucky couldn't stop smiling. Up to that point, it was the happiest day of his life. He pulled back and slapped Gale on the chest. “You ought to thank me, I did you a favour.”

“Like hell you did.” Gale put his hands on hips, his smile settling into a faint line. Images flashed in front of Bucky's mind - a thirteen-year-old, a boy at sixteen, at eighteen, at twenty. “What now?”

Bucky shrugged. He couldn't take his eyes off Gale. “You reckon we could be best friends?”

Gale's eyes shone with mischief. “Don't count on it.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This is a very heavy chapter, guys, touching on grief, trauma and abuse. So please take care if you're reading it.

On the flip side, remember that this story has the "Angst with a Happy Ending" tag.

And just a quick disclaimer: this story is about the show characters and has nothing to do with the real people or their families.

If you want to get into Bucky's mood for the chapter, listen to Billie Eilish's *everything I wanted*.

Grief envelops Bucky in a warm hug as he continues smoking in the cockpit of the fort he slept in. Its finality is almost a comfort. Only emptiness remains in its wake. It's as though nothing could hurt anymore. The pain is so immense that he's numbed by it. There's nothing left of him to be hurt. He sinks into it, and his mind falls, falls, falls into its dark waters. Reality seems far away, out of reach, distant shadows, muted sounds. He can hear Gale's laugh in his ear, and if he turns to the copilot seat, he can see him there, beaming with life. Bucky's love. His everything.

He doesn't look at Bucky, as if the illusion couldn't sense him watching. He's wearing his service cap, his cheeks are pink with joy, and sunshine catches on his eyelashes. There's a toothpick in his mouth, and he plays with it as he starts going through the checklist. After a moment, he raises an eyebrow. *You'd better wake up before we take off,* he says, and the image blurs in Bucky's vision. The loneliness of the truth comes back into focus. A tear spills from Bucky's eye and draws a lethargic path down his jaw.

He wishes the warm trickle of it was blood.

Two days ago, he still had a soulmate. How could he not feel it when the line between them snapped? Why didn't his heart know the

moment Gale was torn away from him? Was he awake when it happened? What if, before he slipped away, Gale looked for him in their dreamscape and he wasn't there?

He wasn't there. *He wasn't there.*

He watches the cigarette smoke billow around him and imagines he could drift away with it.

He knows what it's like when he tries to visit the log house while Gale is awake. When he was sent to England with the advanced party, he did that every night. He always ended up in the forest that the two of them worked on dreaming together, and he couldn't find his way out of the woods until Gale fell asleep too. What he saw today wasn't like that. He couldn't sense Gale at all. It was as if the entire dreamscape was destroyed, and his own memories couldn't reconstruct it.

So, he knows. The truth sits in his heart. A heavy stone. Not MIA. KIA. What a difference one letter could make.

He wipes a hand over his face. He has a splitting headache. Maybe, he finally reached the limit of how much poison he can pour into his body. He feels detached from the present already. If he drank a bit more, would he depart from it completely?

Perhaps, it's better this way. Being captured and interrogated by the Gestapo could be a fate worse than death. The stories Bucky remembers make bile rise in his throat. The bastards have some sort of drug that they use to force a prisoner into a shared dream with his soulmate to extract information or to influence the other half through the connection. His name is right there in Gale's file due to the Air Force's braindead disclosure policy. He has no doubt that had the Germans captured Gale, they would have known that they found a golden opportunity for intel. He can't imagine anything worse than Gale screaming in his dreams under torture until he gives up whatever information they need. And he would give it up. He would give them everything for a gesture of mercy.

"It's better this way, darling." He says to the mirage on his right.

Gale is at peace now.

He feels no more worry for Bucky and the boys.

Bucky hopes it didn't hurt. That it was quick. Easy. Just a sweet, light flight into the eternal blue skies. A pilot's dream of going out.

He hopes Gale wasn't scared.

He hopes he didn’t feel alone.

He hopes it won't be long until he follows.

A jeep approaches the fort Bucky’s sitting in, but he couldn’t care less. He takes another drag of his cigarette and swallows the nausea that builds in his throat. He hasn’t seen Gale scared too many times, but he remembers each and every one of those as vividly as if they happened yesterday.

The first time he discovered that Gale was capable of that feeling at all was back in basic training. They were practicing hand-to-hand combat. To Bucky’s chagrin, Gale wasn’t paired with him, but with an absolute moron called Charlie, whose guts Bucky hated ever since that incident. They were all concentrating on their own training until they heard Gale cry out in pain. Bucky’s eyes flicked to him instantly and saw him sitting in the grass with a hand on his nose. Blood spilled through the gaps between his fingers like a flood and dribbled on his white PT shirt. When he glanced at Bucky, there was a stunned look in his eyes.

Bucky saw red. He stomped over to Charlie and snapped at him, yelling and pushing at him while Charlie stammered over and over again that he didn’t mean to do it, he misjudged his movements. They were making a scene, but Bucky couldn’t stop. A blinding rage he had never felt before took over all rational thought. He could see the CO walking over, but what shut his tirade was Gale himself. He came to stand between him and Charlie, his shoulder brushing Bucky’s for a moment. He flicked blood on the grass with his hand.

“Easy, fellas. I’m fine.”

“I’m so sorry, Buck.” Charlie repeated while Bucky continued seething behind Gale.

“Don’t worry about it.” Gale replied mildly, a reassuring tone in his voice. He turned and squeezed Bucky’s elbow for a second. It left a bloody imprint.

“Egan. Cleven.” Their CO called out.

They snapped to attention. “Sir.”

“Report to my office at 1700 hours.” He paused and gave Gale a once-over. “Go get that cleaned up at Medical, Cleven.”

“Yes, sir.”

That was how they got found out. In the CO’s office that afternoon, they were grilled and put on the spot until they reluctantly admitted that they had a soulbond. Air Force regulations required them to report it, but they were trying to keep it a secret until then. Once discovered, it was added to their files, supposedly for assignment and mission planning purposes, and they knew it would be disclosed to all their superior officers from then on. Never in his life had Bucky seen such an idiotic rule. It must have come from a bureaucratic standpoint and not a practical one. It was a weakness laid on a silver platter for anyone to abuse. Friendly forces and enemies alike.

When he and Gale walked out of there, the discomfort of it started to sink in and take shape. Before, no one had known, just them. After that, dozens of people would. Bucky’s skin crawled with it. A possessive feeling nagged him inside.

“God damn it.” He cursed and kicked at a rock in front of him as they made their way back towards the barracks. He turned to Gale for comfort, but found him livid and unapproachable instead. He refused to even look at Bucky. Displeasure dug harsh lines into his face. “What, it’s my fault now?”

Gale looked like he was one wrong word away from strangling him. “You made a scene.”

“You were hurt. I should’ve punched that imbecile.”

Gale’s eyes flashed with a dangerous gleam. “I don’t need you to act like I’m some withering flower. I can take care of myself.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Bucky gestured, now irritated too. “Am I not allowed to stand up for my best friend?”

Gale glared into the distance. His nose wasn’t broken, but it was still red, and a smudge of dried blood coloured his nostril. “Just leave me alone.”

“You got it.” Bucky muttered back and stormed away.

They didn’t talk for the rest of the day and avoided each other even in the mess hall. No one said a word, but Bucky knew that all the other

cadets watched them fight in silence with growing interest. Whispers of gossip ran their rounds through the group. Some thought it was over a girl. The idea would have made Bucky laugh out loud if he wasn't so angry with Gale.

When night fell, he was determined not to dreamwalk unless Gale came to reconcile with him. He wasn't going to be the one offering the olive branch. No, sir. He went to sleep with that resolution in mind, but, of course, when the first thing he saw in his dream was a box of toothpicks on a table, he picked it up anyway. As if all the pep talk he had given himself flew out the window the minute he was asleep. Always so weak when it came to his soulmate.

He was yanked into Gale's favourite dreamscape as usual, but something felt different in the air. A blurry, silver hue over the sun, the taste of iron on Bucky's tongue when he breathed through his mouth. The sky rumbled ominously above the peak, even though he couldn't see a single cloud. He frowned. Discomfort skittered across his skin in a trail of goosebumps as he approached Gale by the log house. There was no breeze in the air. The clean laundry hung in limp, heavy folds from its lines.

"What are you staring at?" Bucky asked when he reached Gale, but he didn't get a response. Gale's blue eyes were wide open and fixed on one of the white shirts as if it hid a monster about to strike. He blanched pale as a corpse. The hair stood up on the back of Bucky's neck. "What's going on?"

Something dripped wetly on the ground. Bucky's gaze snapped to it. Dark red liquid seeped into the sand. Another drop. Dread crept up on Bucky's spine as he trailed his eyes up - and as he watched, crimson blotted the pristine cotton. A spot the size of a coin, then spreading, spreading, dribbling on the soil in thick, clotting rivulets. Bucky swore. He grabbed Gale by the elbow and pulled, but Gale's legs didn't budge. It was as if they were fused in place.

Gale tipped his head back to look at the sky, his lips moving around words Bucky couldn't catch, until the sun disappeared behind a cloud that grew pink, then red, then purple, like a bruise spreading, blood spilled under the skin. The horror on Gale's face punched Bucky in the gut, and he reached out for him again -

He woke up gasping in his bunk in the training camp. The hot southern summer felt suffocating but his skin still seemed clammy and his shirt stuck to his back.

“Fuck.” He said under his breath and pushed himself off the mattress.

It was pitch black in the barrack but he had plenty of experience navigating the spaces between their bunks. He knew exactly how many steps to take to Gale, how far from the boys’ snoring could he find Gale's soft exhales. He made his way to him as quickly as he could and sighed in relief when his hand made contact with a warm shoulder.

Gale stirred awake immediately.

He didn't say anything. Didn't panic or get confused by Bucky's touch. He didn't push him away in anger. The only sign that something was wrong at all was the quickness of his breaths and the sweat on his neck that rubbed damply on Bucky’s cheek when Bucky folded over him to give him a hug.

“It was just a nightmare.” He whispered into Gale's ear in what he hoped was a comforting voice. The tension they hadn't resolved during the day disappeared as if it had never existed. “Just a nightmare.”

Gale stayed silent still, but his breathing started to slow down. He wrapped his arms tighter around Bucky. His right hand slid up to Bucky's nape and squeezed.

“You okay?” Bucky asked. He felt Gale nod. His hand slipped to Bucky's neck, stroking mindlessly.

Guilt nipped at Bucky from all sides. He wanted to stay and hold Gale as long as Gale needed, but that touch and the sweet, familiar smell that clung so strongly to Gale at that moment woke a hunger in him he couldn't suppress. He wasn't used to it. At that time, he found it frightening, even. Acting on it would have been a crime in and of itself. A blue ticket if ever found out. A shameful trip home.

So, he pulled himself away from his heaven just out of reach, and patted Gale's chest. “Let’s go back to sleep, yeah?”

He couldn't see Gale’s face, but he heard a hum. Gale squeezed his forearm in thanks, then turned away to curl up on his side. Bucky hesitated for a heartbeat before he stood and returned to his bed.

In retrospect, he knows he should have stayed instead of entering a second dream. But it was the first of Gale's nightmares that he had seen. He didn't know what would come next.

When he drifted off again, he returned to the valley as if nothing happened. The mystical storm clouds were gone and the shirts were clean again, swaying languidly in the breeze. The shade of pinking blue in the sky looked like a serene spring afternoon, with the sun low enough to hit the meadow and the waves of the river with a golden glow. Bucky breathed a sigh of relief, drinking in the sweet, crispy air.

“That’s better.” He thought with a smile and made his way past the cornflowers to the log house. He didn't feel like he could hold a grudge anymore. He wanted to make up with Gale and spend the rest of the night just hanging out with him as usual.

He was completely oblivious to the tone of the dream. He would notice it earlier now. How crushing the sunset was, how the sweetness in the air tasted rather like tears on skin than spring flowers. But he didn't realize it back then. He thought everything Gale experienced revolved around him, like his world revolved around Gale.

“Where are you?” He called out after circling the whole house but not seeing even a glimpse of blond hair anywhere. “Come on, Buck, can’t we just forget what happened today?”

He walked back to the front door and stared at its chipped maroon paint, hesitating. In the nine years that they had been sharing dreams, he had never been inside. Didn’t really think it was for him, and he figured it couldn’t have been all that interesting because Gale never went inside either when Bucky was there. But he could feel the pull of Gale's soul like a pulse, like his own heartbeat, and that night, he was in there, behind that door.

Bucky opened it. Its hinges creaked.

“Buck?” There was no answer.

The cabin looked warm and welcoming, with cherry wood furniture, a fireplace and books piling on every flat surface. His memory retained the sight of those that he had seen in Gale's hands before - flight manuals, textbooks, some historical novels that he had teased him about. He found some clothes too, folded meticulously in a rocking chair. Among them, one of his own shirts. It didn't make any sense to him at the time - he had no idea that one of his own unintentional clues to Gale was leaving his clothes scattered everywhere.

Gale wasn't in the living room, the tiny kitchen or the bedroom. There was a narrow set of steps leading to the upper level, which was little more than an attic, with the roof's slope making up the ceiling and

random items crammed into the small space. Bucky had to be careful not to bump his head into the wooden beams as he looked around.

That was when he heard the crying.

For a second, he couldn't move. He always felt awkward about comforting other people, unless their way out of misery was having a good time and painting the town red. He had never had a close enough relationship to learn how to be gentle and not dismissive, present but not forceful. He hated the sound of sniffling. But Gale wasn't crying for an audience, for pity or comfort. He cried to himself, and it was almost silent. As though his devastation was so great that it had no sound that could express it anymore. He was hiding, and Bucky was forcing himself into his safe place, digging him out from behind a pile of rubble, but he was already there. He couldn't just walk back out and ignore it.

"Gale." He said softly as he headed towards the noise. It was the first time he had ever called Gale by his real name, and he thought it rolled awkwardly off his tongue, but it didn't feel right to call him Buck there. Not in that cranny of the old house.

He had to get on all fours to climb into the space where Gale sat with knees drawn up and his face buried in his hands. There was barely enough space for one person, but as Bucky made it there and touched Gale's ankle, the dream shifted to accommodate him. He took that as a good sign. It was just enough for him to sit next to Gale, shoulder to shoulder. Dust particles swirled in the light peeking in through the round attic window. Everything smelled like old wood.

"Hey." Bucky put his arm around Gale's shoulders. "Wanna tell me what happened?"

Gale didn't. He cried into his hands a bit longer, then the entire dream went pitch black. At least, that's how Bucky remembers it now. He couldn't see anything, but he wasn't scared. The sensation of hands touching him slid up over his arms to his shoulders, then Gale crawled over him until he hugged him back. Nothing else happened. It seemed as though they were not in Gale's head anymore but in some shapeless space between the two of them, meeting halfway. The whole night, they stayed like that, in darkness and silence, in each other's arms. They never moved but it felt like they were on a journey together nevertheless, and when Bucky woke up in the morning, it was with something content settled deep inside his chest. He had never felt so anchored in his life, and he didn't feel like that again for years. Not

until Gale kissed him back for the first time.

He pushed himself off his cot and went to look for Gale.

Everyone else was asleep, but Gale's bed was empty. It was early enough that dew sat undisturbed on the grass around the barrack, but Bucky found him in the empty mess already, with dark shadows under his eyes. He was sipping his coffee. His breakfast, still steaming fresh, was untouched on his plate. Bucky sat in the chair across from him and pressed their legs together under the table.

“Morning.” He said. Gale nodded in greeting and leaned back to cross his arms. They watched each other for a moment before Bucky spoke up again. “So. Last night.”

Gale picked at the seam of his shirt with a fingertip, then put a toothpick in his mouth. “You shouldn't have come upstairs.”

“You never said it was off-limits.”

“It isn’t.” Gale cast his eyes down to his plate like he was uncomfortable. “But it was a dream, John.”

“So?”

“People are different in their dreams.”

“Yeah. More honest.”

Gale put a hand on the table and traced the checkered pattern of the tablecloth. The corners of his lips twitched into a smile that was gone before Bucky could truly take it in. “You have no control in your dreams.”

“I don’t think that's true.” Bucky moved his leg against Gale's until Gale looked up at last. “You seem to have an awful lot of it.”

“Not last night.”

Bucky's lips curled into a rueful smile. He nodded. “No.”

The silence stretched on a moment too long again.

“Look.” Gale picked harder at the tablecloth. When Bucky glanced down, he saw that he was scraping his nail against a stain. “If that happens again, don't come after me.”

“Based on what I saw last night -” Bucky raised his eyebrows. “- I'm definitely going to look for you. Hundred percent.”

A small laugh of surprise burst out of Gale. “You never did before.”

The cogs in Bucky's mind turned. “This wasn’t the first time?” When Gale shook his head, he sighed. “I don’t even remember.”

Some of Gale's usual calm amusement returned. “Too busy in your own head, singing at a bar, I reckon.”

“The dames like it.”

Gale smiled around his toothpick. “In your dreams.”

Bucky grinned back, bumping his knee into Gale's again. “You’d know it.” He gestured at Gale's plate. “Aren't you hungry?”

Gale took the toothpick out of his mouth and put it aside. “Not when I have one of these.”

“Are you actually snacking on them?”

That made Gale laugh. “No. But they can stave off hunger, nerves. Anything. Hard to shake off the habit if you pick it up as a kid.”

“Maybe I ought to pick it up too.” Bucky hummed in thought. He stole Gale's fork and speared some of the scrambled eggs on his plate. “I'm always starving.”

Gale watched him eat without a word of protest. He seemed to draw back into himself again, but he met Bucky's gaze when Bucky looked at him. The tension still pulled taut between them whenever silence fell. Bucky didn't know how long he could bear it. He wished he could just go back to that attic and hold Gale like he did all through the night before. He put the fork down on the half-full plate and rested his elbows on the table.

“Buck.” He said, his tone serious. “What happened last night?”

Gale's face went blank. “I lost control.”

“I lose control all the time and it doesn’t look like that.”

“You wouldn't have seen it if you hadn't come after me.”

Bucky nodded. “Well, I'm glad I had.”

Gale looked to the side, blinking. He seemed to be caving in to Bucky's persistence. “You won't quit until I tell you, will you?”

“No.”

Strangely enough, that softened the expression on Gale's face. He turned his eyes back to Bucky. “This doesn’t trouble me or anything when I'm awake. It's just a childhood memory.”

“Clear.” Bucky replied. His childhood wasn’t always the happiest either, but after seeing that nightmare, he had a feeling that Gale would tell him something worse than the tale of an absent father.

“My dad liked his booze.” Gale started in slow, emotionless words. “And my mom liked clean Sunday clothes.”

Bucky frowned, trying to put it together, but he couldn't make the connection between the two.

Never breaking eye contact, Gale continued. “When I was a kid - about nine or ten - I only had one set.”

He nodded to himself, lost in the memory. “Saturday evening, daddy made me put it on, said we ought'a look our best for the guests coming. Some fellas he owed a debt to. I didn't really understand what went on. But it didn’t go well.”

Even as Bucky remembers it now, sitting alone in a fort, although it doesn’t matter anymore, his fists clench in his lap. He wants to punch a wall. He wishes he could go back to the past and be there with Gale again, to react better. To be more physical about it. He didn't know back then how much Gale would welcome his affection, how much he *starved for it.* It was too difficult to read him. So Bucky always held back, until it was too late for Gale to believe it was genuine.

“When they left with all our money, Daddy figured his best bet lay at the bottom of a bottle.” Gale went on with the story, telling it as if it was a joke with a punchline. “He didn't know which one, so he drank all of them.”

Bucky didn't like where it was going. Not one bit.

“Well, he ended up with no more booze, no plan and a useless mouth to feed. Said I was bad luck, reckoned he could beat it out of me. Made my nose bleed.”

“Jesus.” Bucky felt his heart break. It was starting to make sense now. The nightmare, the clean laundry.

Gale looked indifferent. Almost provocative, as if he was challenging Bucky with his eyes, *you wanted to hear it, didn't you? So here it is.* His eyes were completely dry. “The soap we had couldn’t get the bloodstain out of the shirt. Mama figured it was my fault. I shouldn't have put it on in the first place. She yelled at me for it, then I had to kneel on rocks in the corner for half a day.”

Gale leaned forward in his seat, playing with the toothpick holder on the table. “At least I had one of these.”

Bucky mirrored him without thinking. He was close enough that he could have counted the freckles and moles on Gale's face. “Your dad was a fucking bastard. Good that he’s rotting in the ground now.”

Gale gave him a lopsided smile. “Tell me about it.”

He looked into Bucky's eyes as if he was waiting for something, but Bucky didn't know what to say. He was lost in the blues of Gale's eyes and the way his eyelashes moved when he blinked. He could have lingered in that moment forever.

“Well, I'm glad I found you last night,” is what he said eventually, and they shared a smile. Then Gale picked up the fork on his plate and started eating at last. At the time, Bucky felt that Gale wanted to close the conversation as fast as possible. He had the impression that Gale wanted an out, so he gave it to him - but now he knows that if he had pushed a bit more, if he had said more, things could have been different. The connection was already there, but he didn't reach for it. He was scared.

We’ll see how you feel when all this is over, Gale told him only a few days ago, after Bucky said he loved him and asked him to share his weekend pass with him. If Gale had believed him, maybe he would have said yes. He would have come with Bucky and would have never gone on that wretched mission to Bremen. They would still be in London now, and it wouldn’t hurt to take a breath. Bucky's head wouldn’t be throbbing from pain, he'd be napping in a bed, and if he reached to his right, his hand would find a warm chest or the delicate curve of a back. He's left with nothing now.

The fort's hatch opens, and Lemmons’ voice calls out. It echoes in the

plane as hollowly as the feelings rattle in Bucky's heart. “Hello?”

“It’s just me, Kenny.” His voice sounds slurred. At this point, he’s not sure if it's from the booze or from all the unshed tears he swallowed.

“Major? Colonel Harding's looking for you.”

Time to get back into the game.

Bucky pulls himself out of the seat and makes it to the hatch somehow, banging into things that don’t even seem real anymore. He almost falls over as he gets his feet back on the ground.

“You okay, Major?” Kenny asks. His concern comes from a good place, but there’s really no need. Nothing could affect Bucky now. He's a dead man walking, with only revenge as his fuel. “We're all gonna miss Major Cleven, sir.”

Major Cleven, Bucky remembers teasing Gale last week when Gale pulled him out of the pub and drove him behind some abandoned barn just to make out with him. *Is this proper conduct from an officer of the 8th Air Force?* In response, Gale manhandled him until he sat sideways in the jeep. *I don't think it’s proper that you want, John,* he said and opened Bucky's fly.

Blowing out a long exhale, Bucky shakes the memory away. He throws his arm around Kenny just because it's something John Egan would do, not because he has any conscious thought of doing so.

“Weather report.”

“Supposed to clear up.”

“Good.” He nods. He throws the stub of his cigarette away and walks towards Kenny's jeep. Runs a hand through his hair. Tries to remember how to act like he’s in the present and not lost in the regrets of the past.

“You want a ride, Major?” Kenny asks, voice laced with concern again.

“Nah. I'll be all right.” Whatever that entails.

“Are you sure, sir?”

Bucky sits behind the wheel and lets that dark, heavy grief hug him ever tighter. In its embrace, it's easy to say, “Don't worry, Kenny. I don't even feel it.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> I'm so excited about this chapter!! It still contains some heavy topics but there will be some more lighthearted scenes, and we're going to start earning that rating here. Warning for Bucky/female character for anyone who's sensitive about that. But I promise there will be no cheating.
>
> I realized that I can't fit as much storyline into the chapters as I initially thought so we'll need more of them. I think we might reach 30k with this fic.
>
> Also, shoutout to @hogans-heroes for all the support ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Smooth metal slides under Bucky's fingertips. Hills of screws in the hull like the bumps of Gale's spine under his palm when he used to map its exquisite slope, in bed, underwater, through fabric, in their dreams. A route he could walk a thousand times over and never get bored. The morning wind combs through his hair. *I love your curls,* it whispers in his ear and the depth of its voice rumbles against his chest. Leather drapes on his back, but the scent of aftershave is just a cruel illusion, a daydream fading. His cheek warms under the sun's kiss goodbye, *till next time, John,* and a hotel room's door opens in a memory. He lifts himself inside the fort that will take him to Münster. The hatch closes. The ghosts of a hundred stolen kisses greet him in the plane's dark nooks. Gale's name on a bomb, Bucky's heart poised to explode with it. The co-pilot seat welcomes him gently as though it understands how it wounds.

"Trade in your sheepskin, Major?" Brady's voice drifts to him as if he was behind a wall. His head still throbs. What did he say? Oh, the jacket. Yes. His lucky jacket.

"The hell are you wearing?" Gale asked him the first time he showed up in it at the airfield back in Texas after a weekend pass. It all seems so far away. Did it ever happen at all?

He remembers how the weather lingered in that mild, late summer lull even though the calendar had already flipped to the fall. Back home in

Manitowoc, the trees would have changed into coats knitted of a myriad of colours, and the nights would have swept through the streets with nipping cold. He could almost smell the rain in the air. It felt only right to buy a jacket to suit the season, even if that season would never come down South. No one else in their unit had such a jacket. He thought it made him stand out in all the right ways. The looks it drew filled him with cocky satisfaction as he stood there, watching training planes take off one after the other.

“You like it?” He grinned at Gale, opening his arms to show it off.

Gale took off his sunglasses just to drive his look of pity home. “It's hideous.”

Bucky scoffed and flapped a hand at him dismissively. “Says Lieutenant Leather and Drab.”

“It’s my uniform.” Gale tilted his head at him.

“Here. Just touch it.” Bucky replied, grabbing Gale's wrist to pull his hand to the thick white collar. “See? All soft and warm, just the way I like it.”

Gale pulled his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment and glanced away before looking back at him. He gave Bucky a light shove. “We're in Texas, John. You’re already sweating. Whoever you got it from is a swindler.”

Bucky threw his arm around Gale's shoulders and shook him. “We won't stay here forever.”

He got an elbow to his ribs for his trouble, but it was worth it for the way Gale's smile pushed at the pinking curves of Gale's cheeks. “Take it off already.”

He laughed. “Never.”

Now, sitting in Brady’s fort, his nose feels suddenly clogged. He ignores it and the way it exposes the emotion in his voice. He doesn’t have any lucky charms with him anymore. Will that get him where he wants to go or not? “Buck always hated that jacket.”

Brady is smart enough not to comment on it. They do the checklist, then take off. The engines hum to him comfortingly.

Superstition was one of those things that Gale used to reject no matter the situation, with no room for argument. Amulets, prayers, lucky habits, God - he had no interest in any of them. It took Bucky years to understand why. Years to piece together the pattern of pain that Gale carried with him everywhere like a tattoo inked into his soul. Its lines on the surface were painted with sentences bitten in half, clipped words and unexplainable dislikes, but the dark liquid of it spread much deeper under his skin, where Bucky couldn't reach unless he took a scalpel to it.

By the time the summer of ‘42 rolled around and they were promoted to Captains in Florida's humid heat, Bucky had opened exactly one such cut and he still had whiplash from the poison pouring out of it. He couldn't wrap his head around it. How could anyone look at Gale and bear the thought of hurting him? Of making him bruise and bleed and cry? Even at seventeen, after their first shared dream, when he was so disappointed he thought of severing their connection altogether, the idea of causing him pain made him sick. How could his father raise a hand to him?

Gale had countless memories of it that he laid down in front of Bucky at the most abrupt moments with all the emotion of a weather report. Sky CAVU, winds 120 at 15, *my dad used to prefer his belt. He thought it hurt more. But a hand is worse because you know they can feel it too but they continue nevertheless.* It seemed that once he had shared one memory, Gale found it safe to tell Bucky more, but he never really allowed Bucky to try to touch them. They were facts, pillars - not paint on the wall that Bucky could redo or a wallpaper he could tear off and burn.

It was no wonder that Bucky wasn't sure if he should rip that wound further open to pull Gale's other issues out or not. Would it make that tattoo fade? He had to be careful.

But by ‘42, he had another problem to deal with. What was once only a tendril of curiosity that drew him to Gale had taken roots in his mind and spread its branches through all his nerves, from his eyes through his chest to his hips. He felt it everywhere. It made his hands tremble for a moment whenever Gale entered a room he was in. It made his lungs stutter, his knees bounce from nerves. Flowers bloomed inside his body whenever Gale sat beside him and touched his back.

It was unnatural. His body's reactions frightened him, because he had never felt like that before and he couldn’t put a name on it. He kept

thinking of the old belief that if you know the true name of a thing, you can have power over it. He was miles off from that truth, he thought, because he had no control of it. It rather felt like it controlled him instead.

One day, they had a long PT session with a run to top it off, and at some point in the middle, he and Gale started making it a competition. It made their collective suffering fun. Bucky teased Gale until Gale's eyes narrowed in concentration to beat him even though Bucky always had the best legs in their group. They swatted and pulled at each other as they tried to sprint through the last couple hundred yards downhill, far ahead of the rest of the boys and swimming in sweat. Bucky's PT shorts rode up his thighs. They were a size too small but he couldn't get a new pair at the time. He chalked his eventual defeat off to that discomfort, but he knew that Gale wouldn't let him live it down anyway.

"Who's Joe DiMaggio now?" Gale asked him breathlessly when they stopped, calling Bucky out on one of his earlier taunts while Bucky was bent over to try to suck in enough air for his brain to continue working.

"You don't even know who that is." Bucky groaned. His palms slipped on the sweat on his thighs. He straightened with some effort and wiped his face with the hem of his shirt. When he looked up, he found Gale watching him with an expression he couldn't place. He'd know that look now, he knows it like the back of his hand - Gale's controlled hunger, the tip of the iceberg that was his suppressed desire - but back then, he had no idea.

"I know more than you'd think." Gale told him as he stepped closer, and something about his tone made Bucky laugh. He thought Gale was sulking about his remark. He was oblivious to the strain arousal could lace into Gale's low voice if something stirred him deep down. The shimmering threads of it sounded like petulance to him.

He threw his arm around Gale's shoulders out of habit. It was as if he had been conditioned to touch Gale if he was within arm's reach, he couldn't have resisted even if he had tried. Usually, Gale took it without any outward reaction. He didn't tend to touch Bucky back or push him away playfully, but that day, in that moment, his resolve must have been weaker than usual because he reached up and grabbed Bucky's wrist. Their sweat-soaked hands pressed against each other, and Bucky's grin widened. He tried to twist his wrist so that he could reverse their position and hold Gale's wrist captured, but Gale

fought back, and soon enough, he was out of Bucky's embrace and they were wrestling standing up.

“You little -” Bucky grunted through a smile but Gale managed to kick his legs out from under him before he could finish the sentence, and he ended up flat on his back on the ground. Grass and dirt stains decorated his white PT shirt, which stuck to his abs like a wrinkled layer of skin.

Gale stood over him, his head blocking the sun as though he had taken its light as his personal halo. “I win.”

Bucky closed his eyes and sighed, still grinning. “Double or nothing next time?”

Gale kicked his foot lightly. “I wouldn’t bet on a sure defeat if I were you.”

“You don’t make bets at all.”

Gale snorted. “No, I don't.”

It was the beginning of Bucky’s descent into the madness of denied want. It seeped through his pores, tingled on his tongue, made his muscles jump with an overflow of energy. His exuberance was out of control sometimes, and he collected warning looks and disciplinary punishments as though they had been going out of style. He needed to find a girl for a night or two, he figured, for the deviant fantasies to go away. It was only natural that with no outlet, he was struggling with the demons on his shoulders.

Showers were the worst. Bucky had never been shy and had no reason to be anyway - he was of the opinion that he had plenty to be proud of including the proportions God granted him - but even if it hadn't been the case, he would have just shrugged and said he at least knew how to use it. Gale, on the other hand, started out as shy as one could get in a place with about as much privacy as sardines get in their tins. During basic training, he used to take his showers in his skivvies like some of the more reserved boys. Unlike Bucky, who would take one of the shower heads in the middle of the row without a second thought and would sing until they whistled and booed him into amused silence, Gale would try to hide. Not because he had something freaky in his pants, but because of the vulnerability he felt.

By ‘42 though, that shyness was but a notion of the past. He got naked just as easily as anyone else in the unit, and he rarely ever turned

towards the wall just to hide anymore. And by God, was he gorgeous. He was lean and toned, not as hairy as some of the bigger guys but enough to look like a man as opposed to a boy, and his cock was what Bucky would have called a broad's dream of an average size. It was a thing of beauty. When he turned around under the spray of water, rivulets would cascade down his back. Suds of soap would chase each other down the line of his spine to his ass, where the flow would slow to climb the curve of those perfect globes before it continued down his legs.

Bucky struggled to tear his eyes away from the sight. It was an unspoken rule that everyone looked but you were not supposed to do it for more than a second. A quick glimpse was enough to confirm where one stood in the ranks of manhood, so by all means, Bucky should have kept his eyes firmly above the waist. His self-control was never his strongest suit though, so he stared. He stared with the intensity of a starving man looking at a four-course meal put out of his reach, and his body strained like a plant reaching for the sunshine from the shade. It would have been dangerous, if it weren't for the same unspoken rule that kept the others from looking at him for too long.

But there, in Florida, in the summer of ‘42, Gale started watching him back.

Night after night, they would walk to shower heads opposite each other. Bucky would try to dissolve the tension with idle chatter, but sometimes, he had nothing even remotely intelligent to say, and then they would end up facing each other in silence as lukewarm water rained down on their backs. One such night is burned vividly in Bucky's mind. He hadn't had sex in over a month, and his needs were burning him from the inside out. It made him reckless. So, when Gale caught his eye, he didn't look away as usual, but he held Gale's gaze instead. The thrill of doing something forbidden made him half-hard. He ran his bar of soap across his chest, his pebbling nipples, over his abs, down in lazy circles, and he felt as though he was caught in a spell. Gale's blue eyes were dark and serious as they bore into his. His long eyelashes, clumped together wetly, never fluttered to even blink. His lips parted but he didn't say anything.

Bucky doesn’t know what would have happened if a clumsy officer from another unit hadn't slipped on the tiles and fallen over with a yelp down the other end of the line of showers. Perhaps, he would have given himself unquestionably away and earned himself that blue ticket. Perhaps, Gale would have broken the spell. Perhaps, they

would have kissed that night, and it wouldn't have taken him almost a year more to confess to Gale. Who knows?

Back then, all he knew was that things were getting out of hand. He had to do something about it. So, despite Gale's open disapproval, he spent as much time as he could chasing girls in the city, putting on the charms, fucking them face to face to drill it in his mind that a dame's soft body under his was the natural way of things, not the deviance his pent-up arousal urged him to seek on a daily basis. He drank more too, because drinking eased his aches, and he thought he was doing quite well, all things considered.

Until it crept into his dreams.

It was a stifling hot night, when most of the guys couldn't stand even the lightest layer of clothing on their skin. They were all down to their underwear and were sweating miserable buckets in their cots while the odd stray mosquito buzzed around their heads. The smell of rotting vegetation was thick in the air. Even after so much time spent at various airfields in the South, heat like that still left Bucky aroused. Something about the slippery decadence of damp skin or the musky smell. He didn't know. But what he did know was that right then and there, he couldn't take care of it in the way he would have, had he been on leave. He forced himself to sleep instead, praying that the need would be gone come morning.

His mind, of course, figured that the best way to help with that was to seek relief while he wasn't conscious of it.

"Oh, God." He remembers groaning in the dream he entered.

He was in bed with the pretty blonde he had picked up in downtown Tampa a few weeks before, and she moved on top of him languidly, dragging it out. They were in her own room, just like in his actual memory - she was a nurse living with two of her friends, who must have heard their tryst through the thin walls but Bucky had never minded an audience. Her breasts were small and she had a sporty, slender build that had looked so familiar in the bar where they had met that Bucky had taken instant interest.

In the dream, he caught her around the waist and flipped them over to finish like that, pinning her to the mattress with his thrusts, but when he looked at her again, her face began to change. Her hair straightened and withdrew into a shorter cut, her eyes got rounder, the set of her jaw widened - until Bucky was left staring at a face he

didn't want to recognize but whom he did nevertheless.

“Yes.” He sighed and continued moving, completely betraying what his rational thoughts kept suppressing when he was awake. “Buck -”

“Quit calling for me. Can’t a fella have a moment to himself anymore?” He heard a voice approaching from the corridor, and he had just enough time to panic the fantasy away before the door opened and the real Gale walked into his dream. He looked flushed and irritated, but he was fully dressed in civilian clothes. “We don’t have to share every dream, you know.”

He looked Bucky up and down. As his gaze swept over Bucky's naked body, clothes appeared to cover Bucky's skin in its wake. He leant against the doorframe, his head dropping back against the wood. He glanced around the room, from the flowers on the desk to the discarded polka dot dress on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Just trying to survive this goddamn heatwave.”

That turned Gale's expression fondly exasperated. “I think we should keep to our own heads until it’s over.”

“I'm not the one trespassing.” Bucky grinned at him.

“You kept calling for me.”

“I did not.”

“I couldn't take a step without tripping over your clothes.”

Bucky hummed. He didn't have a good comeback. His mind was still reeling from the pleasure of his interrupted wet dream, of seeing Gale under him like that. It didn’t bother him in his sleep, only the morning after. He blamed the heat. “Where were you going?”

Gale closed his eyes and held out a hand. Bucky took it.

The next thing he knew, he was falling. His body was weightless and heavy at the same time, and he got a glimpse of the azure sky and the edge of a cliff, then he splashed into a cool body of water. He sank into its cold depths of relief. It licked at his overheated body with soothing strokes, washing the tension and the discomfort away. He broke through the surface with a grin, and realized that they were in a

lake in a mountain range.

“I love Wyoming.” He sighed happily and leant back to float on the surface.

“Because you don’t know it.” Gale's raspy voice said behind him, and he felt hands grip his shoulders before he was pushed underwater again.

He started wrestling with Gale, grinning breathlessly whenever he was above the surface until they tired each other out. They swam to the shore then sat on the rocky ground. Their wet clothes stuck to their bodies in thin folds. Even in his sleep, Bucky had to fight the fluttering in his stomach when he looked at the shapes the fabric outlined on Gale.

“Why are you so good at this?” He breathed out, feeling more relaxed than he had in weeks.

“Dreaming?” When he nodded, Gale paused. He let the silence fill the space. For a moment, only the sounds of nature broke the quiet, and the distant laughter of children jumping into the water on the opposite shore. The trees leaned together and away from each other with a rhythmic whoosh. “I read a lot about lucid dreaming when I was a kid. Then, I practiced.”

“Yeah?”

Gale hesitated again. “I wanted to find you.” When Bucky looked at him, his lips curled into the faintest of smiles. “I didn't know I'd get saddled with a loony.”

Bucky grabbed at a tuft of grass and threw it at Gale, who snickered as the blades fell around him like green snow. Some got stuck in his hair. When Bucky reached out to pick them off, Gale looked at his face with his eyes bright and trusting.

“Did you wish on a shooting star too?” Bucky teased.

“Shooting star?” Gale's voice sounded dryly amused. “Sure, Bucky.”

“You don’t believe in it?” Bucky asked. “So what do you do when you really want something? Pray? I always wondered about that.”

“I do something about it.”

“Yeah, but what if you can’t? If it's out of your hands?”

Gale glanced at him wistfully, then his face closed off. “I don’t go stroking statues or kissing crosses, I can tell you that.”

“Why not?”

Gale picked up a pebble and weighed it in his hand. After a moment, he threw it as far into the water as he could. “Because if there had ever been something divine out there, it would have answered me sooner.”

Bucky wonders if he was right. If all the rituals and beliefs, the lucky deuces and jackets and snow globes mattered jack shit in the grand scheme of things. He did everything by the book, except, perhaps, going to church. He stuck to his superstitions, relied on them, cataloged what brought him good luck like a baseball coach would examine his players’ stats. He tried to shield Gale with them too, yet he still lost him.

Paulina's words echo in his mind. *There’s no balance. Just one event after another. The worst come out untouched. The innocent dead.* She knew how this world worked. Bucky's only just coming to understand. But he'll be damned if he just lies down in defeat to this rule. Nor Brady, nor Hammy, nor any of the other boys deserve to die just because he has no reason to live anymore. He'll do everything to complete the mission as he should.

He looks out through the cockpit's window at the right wing and what's visible from the rest of the squadron, and beyond that, the serene sunshine. Still over friendly territory, it's so easy to forget that many of them are flying to their deaths. For a few minutes, he can pretend he's not on another suicide mission, but back in the States with Gale and Curt, and all the other friends he lost. Flying in their first B-17's, laughing and joking and spreading rumours about “No Engine Cleven” in Walla Walla as the wet northern autumn soaked them to the bone.

Gale had the most beautiful dream after that incident. A silent fortress flying over endless fields of green, orange and yellow, autumn woods as far as the eye could see. Wisps of fog and sunshine dancing around the wings to a waltz played by propellers that moved without a sound. Then the ocean of the sky with their lone ship sailing past the clouds, through the vast, empty air. Bucky sat in the co-pilot seat but he didn't

even touch the controls. He just watched Gale as he stirred their plane like a rider would guide a horse, as if he and the machine were one being with one heart and shared lungs and muscles that moved together in easy, fluid strokes. They didn't talk. He was merely a passenger in Gale's flight through euphoria, and he was grateful he got to witness it.

They landed on the airfield much like Gale had in reality, to the whooping and cheers of their friends, but by the time Bucky made it out of the fort, all the people were gone from the dream. It was just Gale standing there with his eyes closed, his forehead pressed to the sun-warmed hull, his palms moving gently on the metal.

“I'm in love.” He smiled, and the pearls of his teeth glittered in the sunlight.

Me too, Bucky thought, and he wanted to die.

Predictably, the mission to Münster doesn’t go well. The odds were impossible to begin with, but with all the mechanical failures and the swarm of Luftwaffe vultures hitting them at once, they don't stand a chance. M’lle Zig Zig is decimated before a single bomb could reach the target. Bucky has no idea where his crew is scattered and whether they've made the descent alive.

He parachutes to the ground near a farm house. The impact hurts, but he has no time to nurse the shock of it or to recover from the fear and anger racing through his veins. After they sounded the bailout alarm, there was a moment when he hesitated, when he considered the option of going down with the plane, taking a shortcut to Gale. Brady might have sensed it, he doesn’t know. Or perhaps the man was just a stubborn bastard on principle, but he insisted that Bucky should jump first, and that was enough of a push to snap Bucky's survival instincts back into motion and him out of the fort.

He takes shelter in a copse of trees he'd be too generous to call a forest, but it will do for now, he figures. He hides in the canopy of an old oak, trying not to remember the days when he, Gale, Curt and DeMarco explored the woods near Walla Walla. He's on his own now. He only has his own skills to rely on. Once he's settled on a thick branch with his back against the trunk, he takes a moment to gather

himself. What now? How is he going to make it out of this hellhole?

Nightfall comes faster than he expected, even though he spends most of his day hungry and sitting on hard wood that digs into his flesh mercilessly after a few hours without movement. But when visibility dims, he finally decides to make his move. He has a better chance at avoiding capture in the dark, he reckons. It makes progress more difficult, but the countryside he trudges through is quiet and empty. Owls hoot around him, critters scamper into the bushes. The moon peeks out from behind the clouds to gild patches of the foliage silver, highlighting the way through, playing with the willow-o'-the-wisps of the marshland. Frogs croak around him as if to warn him where the swamp starts.

It amazes Bucky how alive everything feels now that his senses are on high alert. He always preferred the buzz of city nightlife to nature, but he can feel the magic of it now. It could be his exhaustion putting delirious thoughts in his brain, but he imagines that the plants and animals are his friends, that they're there to keep him company through every lonely moment. Perhaps one of the shimmering bog lights ahead is Gale's spirit asking him to take step after step.

Unbidden, the memory of another night comes to his mind as he continues his quiet walk.

In December 1942, Marge came to visit them in the freezing cold of Utah. Gale got himself the longest pass he could ask for and left Bucky on his own for a week without a word. Bucky sulked through it and avoided Gale's clues in his dreams too, not wanting to walk into his mind while he must have been cuddled up in bed with his girl. Gale didn't seek him out either, but Bucky could still feel his presence, and it may have been pathetic but he took satisfaction from the idea that Gale was sleeping at night instead of making love to beautiful, lovely Marge. He couldn't even hate her for standing between him and Gale. That’s the way things ought to be. A soulbond between two men is never meant to be more than a friendship rooted deeper than bones. Bucky knew this - *knows* this - but somewhere along the way, the concept of shoulds and musts lost meaning to him. The heart wants what the heart wants, no matter what the mind says.

At the end of that week, he got his own leave, and as if nothing happened, Gale invited him to the movies.

“Marge has a friend here called June, she's visiting her brother.” He said.

“You’re fixing dates for me now?” Bucky grinned but he could tell it came out more resentful than joking.

Gale's brows twitched to furrow, but he pretended that everything was okay. He flashed Bucky a small smile. “It’s all Marge.”

“Well, lucky me, I guess.”

“You don’t have to come.”

“I'll come.” He said with faked nonchalance. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

So, they went out together, the four of them. It wasn't the first time that Bucky met Marge, and he had seen her photograph, of course, but it was the first time he was acutely aware of how sweet and affectionate she was with Gale. They made a perfect match. Like angels from a cheesy Christmas postcard, walking hand in hand down the snowy street and giggling while Bucky tried his best not to be morose with his date.

“John.” Marge smiled at him at one point, and he hated how beautiful it looked and how she called him John like Gale did. “Tell us about that Yankees game you and Gale went to! He refuses to tell me anything.”

Bucky wanted to say no, but he took one look at the fond smile Gale gave him and he couldn’t stop the words from coming out. He launched into a long story about the game, and only noticed about halfway through it that it was all a ploy to get him to talk to June. She looked at him as though he was the most enticing figure in the whole line queuing in front of the theater. Her brown hair was done up in flawless rolls, her eyes were green, lips thin and elegant, and the curves of her body were obvious even under the heavy winter clothing. Bucky thought about taking her to bed at the end of the night and felt nothing at all.

“Come on, let's go inside.” Gale clapped him on the back, and his whole body shuddered in desire.

The movie was entertaining enough. It was a small room, but they had tried to fit as many seats in it as possible, so all their chairs were crammed tightly together. Bucky's shoulders barely fit in that narrow space, and the only way his legs didn't knock into the next row was if he kept them spread. His knee pressed to Gale's, and his entire arm burned where Gale's touched his. Every now and then, the back of

Gale's hand brushed his where they rested them on the arms of their chairs. He couldn't tell if it was by accident.

He can’t remember a single frame of the movie. Nor does he recall whether June tried to flirt with him through it.

When it was over, Marge and June went to the restroom and left him and Gale to wait in the lobby alone. Bucky loosened his tie, then shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat. Gale watched him as if he was waiting, but Bucky still didn't know what to say. He toed at the worn carpet under his feet.

“You gonna stay at her hotel tonight?”

“Yes.” Gale said without pause. “You?”

“I think I'm calling it a night.” Bucky admitted. He felt more bitter sadness than lust even though it had been a while since his last date. “So how is it with Marge?”

“Good.”

Gale never shared any information about his sex life, but at that moment, Bucky wanted him to. Desperately. With a twisting, piercing ache in his stomach, he wanted to know if Gale still slept with her. He pushed. “I thought you'd be the type to, you know. Wait.”

Gale's eyes sharpened. “I don’t have anything to wait for.” He said with an edge in his voice. He seemed to debate something for a second before he continued. “I asked her to marry me yesterday. She said yes.”

All of a sudden, Bucky felt like he was going to throw up.

“But she wants to give it a few more years before we do it.” Gale added. “See if her soulmate turns up.”

A beast was eating Bucky inside, clawing at him to come out and say things he knew he should never voice out loud. “Straightforward, isn’t she?”

Gale hummed, but didn't comment.

“Does she know about us?”

Still silent, Gale shook his head. He glanced at Bucky, then away, at a poster on the wall.

“I think you should tell her.”

“I think you should tell your mom.” Gale's eyes snapped back to him like a whip crack.

Bucky's voice hardened. “I'll tell her if you tell Marge.”

Gale's frown deepened as the fire of his anger flashed hot. “Are you jealous? Is that it?”

“No, I'm not jealous.” A glaring lie. “I just think you gotta do right by her, is all.”

“Like you with all your girlfriends?”

“Now, look who's jealous.”

The muscles in Gale's jaw tightened in fury. His eyelashes framed the flame in his eyes like dark shadows flickering around a campfire. “This is a two-way street, John. If you want something, you gotta say it, and say it now.”

The breath caught in Bucky's throat. *Don't marry her,* he wanted to say. *I love you.*

I love you.

But he couldn't get the words out in time. The girls exited the room at the end of the hallway and started walking towards them, snickering and chatting happily. He and Gale stared at each other with dark, furious emotions swirling in the space between their minds, but they couldn't say them out loud. They said goodbye and went their separate ways for the night. Bucky took June home but left her without a kiss, and ended up roaming the empty streets, just as lost and alone as he feels right now.

At least, this time, he knows that Gale is waiting for him somewhere beyond this plane of life.

It's a comfort that one way or another, they will reunite. He holds onto that thought as if it was a beacon of light. He has no doubt that he’s going to die, probably sooner rather than later, and then they'll be together again. But he won't give up that easily, no - he will continue forward relentlessly. He'll fight.

He would rather die running than as a dog in chains.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Phew, what a chapter to write! I worked on this all day and thought I wouldn't be able to finish it, so I'm super happy that I did. This is the longest chapter so far. Thank you to everyone who left me feedback! ❤

> We all know what's coming for Bucky's journey through episode 6, so please consider the following warnings: violence, blood, injuries, mentions of torture, death and deportation. But all these are basically what happened in episode 6 and I tried to keep it from getting too graphic.

"So do you know how to ride a horse?" Bucky asks, deep in the dream of a memory of a dream where Gale looks like he's seventeen and Bucky's twenty-eight with a cracked skull. Even in his sleep, he realizes that it's only a copy of his Gale in front of him - his mind never could conjure him as beautiful and alive as he was in reality.

They're in a crude replica of Gale's favourite dreamscape, built on what Bucky's mind retained of it. It's like walking into a painting - the textures smudge together, nothing moves, silence reigns in the valley. The mountain is a shapeless, slate shadow patched onto the sky. The only smell in the air is a sour trepidation that Bucky can't remember why he feels.

"Sure do." Dream-Gale replies, not noticing the blood on Bucky's face, just going through the motions of a dream they shared six years ago. He puts his thumb and forefinger in his mouth and whistles sharply.

The sound of hooves thudding on the ground reaches them from the distance. The horse that sometimes used to graze on the meadow by the log house appears on top of the hill and gallops down to Gale. It greets them with a happy neigh, despite the blood trickling down its white neck and smearing it rouge. Once again, only Bucky takes notice - the memory plays out as if nothing could disturb it.

Dream-Gale presses his forehead to his horse's and smiles, then jumps up on its back. He settles in the saddle as though he was born to ride. His posture seems easy and fluid. He clicks his tongue, and the horse raises its head attentively in response. They start circling around Bucky.

“Dad *loves* rodeos.” He drawls, his pelvis rocking back and forth with the horse's steps in hypnotizing rolls. Despite the unexplainable fear in his chest, Bucky stares at him in awe. He has seen Gale's hips move in countless mesmerizing ways, naked or clothed, fast or slow, but nothing comes close to watching him on horseback. “Used to make side bets with his buddies. They'd bring me one of the worn-out broncos and bet how long I could stay up on it. He’d usually lose. Never thought too much of me as a rider. I figured, maybe I could prove him wrong one day, so I always did it.”

Bucky huffs. “Sounds safe for a kid.”

Gale smiles at him. “Are you worried about me?”

His voice sounds flirty, pleased - he doesn’t know, he *doesn’t know*. He's just a memory. Seventeen and falling in love. His heart is still open and full of hope, not yet wounded by Bucky's blindness to the treasure right in front of his nose. He doesn’t know that his soulmate won't love him back for years more. He doesn’t know that he’ll only get a few months of happiness before death takes him away.

But Bucky is twenty-eight and dying himself. He has no reason to stick to the memory, to watch it unfold as if it was a goddamn movie. No one forces him to repeat all his lines again. So instead of teasing him back, he walks up to Dream-Gale and stops him.

His palms run up his thin leg. “I love you.”

But this Gale is just his own mind's manipulation, not a machine for time travel. The message doesn’t get through to him. He's but a cardboard figure compared to the real Gale, and he won't tell Bucky how much he loves him already at seventeen. That didn't happen until the stifling dust of Algeria and a kiss stolen under the stars. No, this Gale doesn’t understand - he smiles at Bucky mutely, then clicks his tongue again and the horse takes him away. They break into a gallop, racing across the open field and back, textureless sunshine on their silhouettes. Gale hollers at him as they speed past, and it still draws a laugh out of Bucky despite everything that sits like poison in his throat.

“Show-off!” He yells after Gale, who turns back around again and produces a lasso out of thin air. Bucky grins, holding up his hands. “That better not be what I think it is!”

He knows what's going to happen next, because it already happened six years ago - Gale stopping beside him with a cheeky smile, rope

whooshing through the air, Bucky on his back in the grass, staring up at sky blue eyes and a flushed face.

But this time, something goes wrong. The rope lands around Bucky's neck and snaps tight. It cuts off his air, and he tries to gasp and plead but there's no mercy, he can't breathe. The dream shifts into a nightmare. The grass turns into mud, the replica of the log house becomes a bombed building, Dream-Gale an angry German woman foaming at the mouth for Bucky's blood. *Terrorflieger!* Blood obscures Bucky's vision until all he sees is red.

Red, red, red, life slipping out of him in rivulets, and he'll be buried alive if he doesn't push the pile of dead off him -

Bucky pulls himself out of sleep with a choking gasp, wheezing as he comes back to himself and realizes that he passed out on the cold, harsh floor of a cell. He's on his stomach, and his cracked ribs are knives stabbing his sides with every struggling breath he tries to take. His head is a pincushion of pain. Splitting, tearing, pulsating agony, his brain damn near spilling out just to get away from it through his ear. He pushes himself up on trembling hands and knees and throws up.

He doubts he'll make it through the next few days.

They caught him in the swamp when he ventured too close to the farmhouses in a desperate search for food. His head was constantly throbbing as though something had put it in a vice and squeezed, but he could do nothing about it. They put him on a train, marched him through a bombed town, beat him up, cracked his bones, almost buried him alive. He only sees a blur through his right eye. Is he losing his sight? What else does God want to put him through?

His memories are all jumbled up. He assumes it's because of his bashed in head, but it might as well be exhaustion too. True to his vow, he tried to sleep as little as possible just to avoid his empty dreams, and he managed it well, up until now. At the thought of his memory of Gale at seventeen, his stomach heaves again, and another mouthful of bile splashes on the ground. It felt so wrong. So wrong. Only a shell of the real thing. And it's all he has of his love now.

Suddenly, the harsh metal door swings open, and two German guards step into the room. They recoil at the stench of his vomit and mutter *schwein* under their breaths, then there are hands under his armpits,

pulling him upright. One of them wipes his mouth and face with a rag. Upon the questioning noise made by the other, he says something about a *kommandant.* Bucky's rudimentary German doesn't help him catch anything else.

"Will you vomit again?" The guard slaps Bucky's face lightly as if to wake him up, but it still hurts enough to make him grunt.

"I will if you boys keep that up." Bucky replies, satisfied to see the disgruntled look on the man's face upon his lack of deference.

But it isn't enough to goad the men into granting him the final blow. These are not enraged civilians, nor soldiers on the front lines. This is a POW processing camp. They probably deal with this every day. Without a response, they let go of his arms and push him towards the door. "Out!"

The office they lead him to is warm and comfortable. If it wasn't for the repulsive sight of the *führer's* portrait on the wall, Bucky might even consider it welcoming. The rich dark wood of the furniture is a pleasant sight after the ruins he saw in the past few days. A smooth-voiced, handsome man, some Lieutenant Haussmann, greets him kindly. He looks smart, his eyes sharp and cold-blue behind his glasses despite the pleasant smile on his face. He offers Bucky whiskey, drinks a sip with him with camaraderie. Buttering him up as if he was a piece of toast. His tone is playful as he reads the contents of Bucky's file.

"Married?" He smirks at him as though they were sharing an inside joke. The twisted, revolting thought that they could have been friends in another life makes Bucky's stomach churn all over again. "From what I hear, definitely not."

Bucky watches him play like a cat would with a mouse, and reminds himself not to say a single word. It's easy not to react when defeat sits so heavily in his bones. There's nothing to say that would make anything better. What does he care if this man thinks he's a whore?

"Are you a baseball fan, Major?" Haussmann continues to smile at him. When that gets no reaction, he offers Bucky a cigarette. A terrible Kraut brand, but Bucky will take what comfort he can get. At least it keeps the remaining contents of his stomach settled as Haussmann goes on about baseball and the World Series, about Bucky being a

Yankees fan.

“Would you like to know the outcome of the World Series?” The man asks, his voice like honey.

Bucky wants to laugh in his face. Does he really think he’ll give up information just to hear whether his team won the championship? He says nothing.

After a moment of silence, the tension tightens in the air. He can feel Haussmann's demeanor shift. Even though there's no outward sign of it, the pressure he lays on Bucky turns from insincere friendliness to the drag of a knife on vulnerable skin. There's some sadistic glee in it.

“Was Buck Cleven a Yankees fan?”

I will kill you with my bare hands, Bucky snarls on the inside.

It takes him everything not to lunge across the table and stab the man with his own pen. How dare he mention Gale's name, how dare he! That name doesn’t belong on the lips of monsters, or to this place. Their bloodstained hands will taint it.

“No? Yes?” Haussmann prods. Bucky stares into nothing. “I hear he was quite a flyer.”

The papers shift on the desk to reveal the news of Bucky's nightmares. For a split second, he’s back in London, wanting to scream like the woman he saw in the street, staring at her dead child by that bombed down building. *Is he dead? No, he’s not! Just tell me!*

“I read of his exploits in the Regensburg attack.” Haussmann's words barely reach his ears until he decides to sink the knife slowly into Bucky's flesh. “He was your soulmate, wasn't he?”

Bucky's eyes snap to him, his heart pounding. The veins throb in his temple.

Haussmann's expression holds no emotion behind his ever-present smile. “I always wondered what it was like.” He muses. “To lose your soulmate. I imagine you can feel it quite acutely when it happens.”

Bucky has to swallow down a mouthful of bitter bile. No, you can’t feel it. They just slip away as though they never existed. As though you never had an intact soul, always just one half, never meant to be whole.

“What happens if you try to reach him?” Haussmann asks, and for the first time since the interrogation began, it sounds like he genuinely wants to know. Beyond the darkness of his grief and the queasiness swirling in his gut, the cogs in Bucky's brain start turning. Why would they care? Is this part of their twisted research into soul bonds? Is there a group of nasty Nazi scientists waiting to take him for their experiments of dead bonds?

“Is there a wall in your mind?” Haussmann leans forward in his seat, his elbows on the desk. “A locked door?”

Once again, Bucky has to tighten all the muscles in his back not to flinch. In the days he spent on the run in Germany, sometimes he couldn't keep avoiding sleep. Whenever he succumbed to it, his dreams were all empty and dark, but he remembers the locked doors. Bolted shut with wrought-iron, heavy oak keeping him in. They didn't even have a handle on his side. He thought it was his fear of capture taking a toll on him. What if it wasn't? What if…?

He feigns indifference and takes another pull of the Kraut cigarette.

“If you could open that door again - or climb the wall -” Haussmann drags his words in front of Bucky like a hunter hanging bait above the mouth of his trap. “- would you do it?”

What does he mean? Bucky wants to run or fight his way out of this before they drive him into insanity. Gale is dead. His darling body rots in a potato field, like Paulina's husband's. You can’t reach the dead in your dreams. The routes between your minds, those beaten paths leading home, are destroyed forever. Does this man want him to believe that Gale is still alive? Or that they found a way to connect with the dead? Is that the game they're playing to get him to put hundreds of others in danger? It must be a lie. Just an interrogation tactic. There’s no other way.

His lips remain sealed.

At his stubborn silence, Haussmann softens his voice as if he cared. “I want to talk to you about Buck Cleven, John.”

Bucky looks him in his ice-cold eyes and repeats his name, rank and serial number. Gale is dead. No amount of Nazi torture will bring him back to Bucky.

The cell they keep him in is as bare as it gets. There's a chair to sit on and a cold, hard bench for sleep that Bucky doesn't need, a sink, a bucket for a toilet. Grey walls with scratched drawings, the misery of dozens of prisoners passing through the same building, their ghosts lingering. Bucky doesn't have a pen, but his head still bleeds if he picks at the scabs, so he draws a B above the bed with his own blood. He chuckles at it, more out of madness than joy. There's nothing to keep his thoughts occupied. In his half-delirious state, he takes sanctuary in his memories.

He daydreams.

His mind flies back to Nebraska's hail storms and the vast, treeless prairie. To Gale teaching him how to ride a horse and him showing Gale how to dance, to the taste of toothpaste on his tongue.

Seven months ago. That's all they had - seven months. It's a staggering thought when Bucky thinks about it. How could it have been only that long when every kiss felt like coming home after centuries of separation? How did he keep himself away for years when the only time he ever felt complete was in Gale's arms? How could Gale stand the pain?

Perhaps, he was all too used to not being wanted the way he wanted in return.

It all started with a piece of carefully folded paper Bucky found in the pocket of his uniform one sunny spring morning.

Dear John, he remembers reading Gale's impeccable cursive so clearly that the same mix of confusion and delight he felt that day vibrates in his bones now when he thinks about it.

I have been trying to find a good time to talk with you in private but the opportunities elude me, and I cannot keep this to myself any longer. Marge wrote me two weeks ago. She found her soulmate. Some Private in the Army. They're happy, she said. We're no longer engaged. The next words were blotted out, as though Gale had changed his mind mid-sentence about what to write. *I wanted to let you know. Yours, Gale.*

If Bucky didn't trace those last two words with his thumb a hundred

times, he never traced them at all. His fingertip still remembers the shape of the ridges where the pressure of Gale's pen dented the paper. Jitters chased each other through the nerves of his legs. It felt like he was about to step off a precipice, but he wanted it more than anything. He hid the letter in his footlocker, took a moment to collect himself, then went to look for Gale.

He found him in an equipment room, rummaging through a box of oxygen masks with seemingly no purpose. The orderlies bustling around kept shooting bewildered looks his way. When Bucky came up behind him and put a hand on his back, he jumped, but they both pretended they didn't notice.

“Whatcha doing, Buck?” Bucky asked as he leant against a packed shelf opposite Gale.

“Nothing.” Gale muttered, avoiding his gaze. A toothpick rested in the corner of his mouth.

“That’s great.”

At his sarcasm, Gale's eyes flickered to his. His lips curled into a tentative smile. “Quit that look.”

“What look? This is just my face.” Bucky shrugged, his hands sweating where they were tucked in the pockets of his sheepskin. He was glad he had his lucky jacket, it brought him some semblance of calm. “I read your letter.”

Gale hummed and nodded, waiting. One of the orderlies eavesdropping nearby all but ran away when Bucky raised an eyebrow at him. When he turned back to Gale, he licked his dry lips. “How are you doing?”

Gale seemed to struggle with his reply. He put his hands on his hips, searching Bucky's face to gauge his feelings. “Doing all right.”

“You could have just told me in a dream.”

Gale fiddled with his toothpick. He must have been nervous. “Does it matter how I did it?”

It didn’t really. Bucky wanted to know why he chose to write a letter when they slept only a few bunks away from each other, but he didn't press the issue. He would find out months later in Thorpe Abbotts. Gale would whisper it in his ear as they lay under the cover of a clear

summer night. He did wish on a shooting star once. What he hoped for wasn't a small thing to ask from the universe, he knew, and he was terrified that Bucky would tell him that his wish could never come true.

Bucky could have asked him that day in the stale air of the storage room, but he just shook his head. “Any plans for your next weekend pass?”

Gale stared at him for a beat, then looked down at the box of masks in front of him. A half-suppressed smile appeared on his face. “I don’t know. You tell me.”

Bucky's grin could have lit up the entire base.

Of course, when the time came, it seemed as though everyone in their unit wanted to join them, mostly to follow Bucky to the best dives he knew in town. He should have thought of an excuse but he was caught off-guard and had none, so he had to spend most of his time with their friends, sharing nothing but quick, stolen glances with Gale the whole day. One of the boys got them all a lodging at a boarding house for the night, a pair of them to a room. Some of the guys grumbled about having to share, no doubt seeing their plans with the local girls go up in smoke, but Bucky felt himself flush with excitement. It all sounded like the universe was giving him a chance to do something right just this once. He didn't know if anything would happen, but God, did he hope.

Gale looked like none of it affected him at all.

The night dragged on as though it was a repeat of their previous weekend off-base. Drinking and shooting the shit with the boys, dancing, betting on random things. Bucky tried not to get so sloshed that he felt the urge to sing. He did his best to stick to Gale's side, but it sometimes embarrassed him how strong his desire to be with him was. He would be waiting for his drink at the bar and feel unbalanced without Gale's shoulders under his arm, or he’d dance with a girl but he’d long to sink into the warm space carved out for him by Gale's side. Whenever he sat back down in his seat, Gale gave him a warm look as though he saw right through him. It made Bucky's pulse race.

When they made it back to their room in the boarding house, he thought they would hover awkwardly for a bit, then talk about the

unbearable tension between them, see if it meant the same to them both. He wanted to ask if Gale thought they could have something together, now that the engagement was off. He wanted to know if it was okay to throw all law and belief to the wind just because they loved each other.

But instead, Gale took one look at him and bolted. He announced that he was going to wash up and disappeared in the bathroom. It was all quiet once the door shut behind him. The world was a dark blanket outside. Only the bedside lamp on the nightstand between their beds supplied any light at all. Bucky paced around for a moment, glancing from one closed door to another, then at the bedsheets before he decided to go after him. Liquid courage coursed through him like a wildfire.

He found Gale brushing his teeth, down to his trousers and undershirt. He didn't even look surprised to see Bucky there. He just shot him an amused look in the mirror and continued cleaning his perfect teeth. The urge to touch him was too strong to resist. He slotted himself to Gale's side and tried to push him away, grabbing his own toothbrush as though he had barged in just to use it. He was tipsy enough that brushing Gale's bare arm left him giddy rather than nervous.

I'm going to kiss you, he thought with drunken conviction. *Let me do it, Gale.*

Unaware of his thoughts, Gale elbowed him back and started scuffling with Bucky for the space, splashing water everywhere. After a moment, he spit into the sink, then mumbled through the remaining foam in his mouth. “Go away.”

“You’re hogging the sink.” Bucky jabbed his fingers into Gale's sides to tickle him. Gale burst into an involuntary laugh and dropped his toothbrush to trap Bucky’s hands at his waist, but no matter how he fought, he couldn’t contain the laughter bubbling out of his throat.

Their eyes met in the mirror.

Bucky's fingers stilled.

Their smiles dimmed. The sound of their breathing echoed loudly off the tiles in the sudden silence that descended on the cramped space. Gale turned his head to look up at Bucky directly, the hope in his eyes bright like the cornflowers in Bucky's dreams, and his wet hands slid over Bucky's wrists.

Bucky leaned down and kissed the foam off his lips.

It was like walking down the last road at the end of a long journey home. Every second seemed to take his soul a step closer. Every moment of Gale's lips moving against his was a *welcome back,* Gale's hums a rumbling *missed you.* It didn't feel like a first kiss. Their bodies found each other as though they had always known how to be whole together, and the way Gale kissed him back was just the universe righting itself after all those years of spinning out of kilter.

Their exhales trembled against each other's faces when he pulled away. They glanced at each other for a moment, then Bucky leaned in again, pressing Gale's soft lips open, seeking his warmth. Gale's hands moved to his cheeks, holding him so carefully that Bucky's heart broke from all the love he couldn't contain in it. His own arms wrapped around Gale's waist.

"You taste like toothpaste." He laughed quietly when they pulled back again.

Gale grabbed his glass of water and rinsed his mouth, then pressed his sweet, damp lips to Bucky's. "How about that?"

Bucky dove in as though those lips had been his only life source.

The bang of a fist pounded on their door.

They sprang apart so fast that Bucky had to right himself with a hand on the wall.

"Bucky." It was Hambone. He didn't wait for a reply, just opened the door and rushed in. From the opposite side of the bathroom, Gale stared at Bucky with his eyes wide open. His pale cheeks looked bright red in the bathroom light. When he ran the tip of his tongue over the corner of his lips as if he still felt the same tingling that Bucky did, Bucky smiled at him.

"Bucky, help a buddy out, please!" Drunk off his ass, Hambone appeared in the doorway. "Do you have a prophylactic? I'm all out."

Bucky snorted. He put on his usual charm and grinned. "You've come to the right place, Hammy."

He could hear Gale's huffing laugh as he walked past him. He swatted at his arm, and Gale slapped him back.

That night, their dreamscape sang to Bucky with the melody of summer. Birds chirped in the forest, the meadow buzzed with the noise of tiny lives, the heady smell of linden blossom drifted on the breeze. The sun cradled the log house in its indolent afternoon glow, and the clean laundry was not only dry but folded in a basket on the porch. Flowers bloomed in the cooler grass of the riverbank. Bucky glanced around and saw no sign of Gale, except for the open front door. A mosquito screen flapped back and forth in the wind.

He walked inside.

The attic would have felt suffocating on such a warm summer day, but in Gale's dream, it was pleasant and peaceful as always. Bucky weaved his way through the clutter and got on his hands and knees where he knew the right opening was, and the space was already widening to welcome him as he crawled to Gale's feet. Once there, in the nook, he sat back on his haunches and gave Gale an exasperated look.

“Okay, Gale. Here I am.”

The warm light filtered through the circular attic window rested in Gale's golden hair. He was in the same clothes he wore when Bucky kissed him, and he sat with one leg pulled up and the other crossed under him as he leant against the wall. He stared at Bucky as though he had been waiting for that moment his whole life and didn't know how to live through the pain of its joy as it was happening.

“Here you are.” He smiled mildly.

Bucky scooted closer, putting his palms on the floor on either side of Gale's hips. Gale's moles and freckles tempted him to kiss them. “Why are you hiding?”

Gale's right hand reached up and slid over Bucky's cheek so lightly that he could barely feel it. “I'm too happy.”

Bucky smiled wide enough to feel it in his cheeks. He closed the distance between them to taste Gale's joy on his lips.

They spent the entire dream there, in that narrow, quiet space. Gale crawled all over him again but this time to push him on his back and lie down on his body as they made out. With the memory of their real kisses still fresh in Bucky's mind, it felt as though they were touching physically too. Every sensation felt so vivid that for most of the night,

he couldn't remember he was dreaming at all.

“Gale.” He groaned when Gale's weight shifted on his crotch. He pulled Gale's undershirt out from his trousers and slid a hand under it. “If we have sex here -” He pressed a quick peck to the curve of Gale's lips. “- will you remember it tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.” Gale found his mouth again and kissed it open messily, his hand curled around Bucky's neck. “Maybe, I'll only remember how it made me feel.”

Bucky stroked a wide path down Gale's back and gripped his hips. “I want to make you feel good.”

Gale held his face with both hands and smiled as he mumbled a drawling okay into their next kiss.

The next time Bucky jolts back to consciousness in his cell, it's to the harsh shouting of the guards ordering him to get out. It seems that they're herding all the prisoners to a train. It’s a rusty, prehistoric thing that must have been used to transport cattle, now filled with bruised and battered men. Bucky has no choice but to climb in. His head is killing him, and his stomach roils from the stink of rotting hay and manure inside, but he stays close to the edge of the car and helps whoever he can to get inside.

As they try to comply with their orders without getting shot, a different train thuds past them on the other track. Dark and ominous like a countdown as its wheels drag it forward, away. Hands reach for help through the gaps in its wagons, people scream.

They stare into the abyss of pure evil, and its cold fingers dig into their chests until all their pain seems to shrink in the face of the world's suffering.

Someone panics and tries to run.

He doesn’t make it further than five feet before the guards kill him. His body is tossed in with them as if it was a bag of potatoes, then the wagon slams closed and they’re left in the suffocating darkness. Bucky

leans against the cold metal and tries to catch glimpses of the countryside through a gap as they lurch forward.

It feels as though the train ride will never end unless they're all dead. Some people get sick all over themselves and the men around them, others pass out. One man cries noisily a few feet away from Bucky. Fingers curl into Bucky's sleeve for something to hold onto.

“Can we do something for him?” He asks the man clinging to him when the sobbing turns pained.

“I don’t think so.” The man tells him. He sounds level-headed. A welcome respite from the oppressive fear around them. “They gave him something.”

“Injections.” Another voice chimes in from Bucky’s other side. He can make out the faint outlines of a scruffy face. “His soulmate is in the Navy. They tortured him until they got something out of him.”

“Forced dreamwalking?” Bucky asks, horrified. He knew it was a possibility, but to hear it firsthand, to see the damage in its aftermath is devastating. The man seems incoherent as he continues to weep. This is what would have happened to Gale, had he been captured alive.

“These are animals.” The first man says, and they fall into tense silence again.

Bucky presses the heel of his palm to his temple to alleviate the pain, and tries not to think about the bolted shut doors in his dreams.

They're taken to another transfer camp for the night, then back to the train again, until they finally reach what looks like a stalag for longer-term containment. They're marched inside through a row of gates, fenced off on all sides. The prisoners already there crowd around and cling to the fences, trying to spot their friends among the newcomers. They're all yelling, calling out names desperately, and it's a jumble of noises that make the ache in Bucky's skull worse but he can’t help the hope that raises its head in his heart like a phoenix reborn from its ashes. What if this is not the end after all? What if he was mistaken, what if he finds a ray of light here despite it all?

He raises his head higher, frowning as he tries to make out familiar faces with his half-blurry view. Someone calls out for a Johnny but he

doesn’t think anyone would call him that. His pulse races. Did any of his men make it? Could Brady be here? What about Hambone?

“Bucky!” The word reaches him in the chaos, and he tilts his head to the right, searching the crowd, hardly breathing until his gaze locks on a mess of blond curls and Crank's kind face. “Bucky! Over here!”

“Crank!” He calls out, his hand reaching involuntarily as a sudden wave of relief washes over him.

All around Crank, widely grinning faces greet him, hands wave as though he was a signal of hope and not a half-dead man dragging his feet through the motions. He feels the sting of wetness gathering behind his eyes as he recognizes them all. A small laugh burst out of him at the sight. He’s not alone.

“Murph! Glen!”

His mind discards all rational thought and conviction and latches onto a hope he hasn't let himself feel since that call in London. “Hey! Any of you know if Buck made it?”

They don’t hear him. No one hears him. But he needs to know, he needs to be sure, because if there's any chance left then this is it, the end of the tunnel, the fork in the road, and he'll find out if his path leads to despair or deliverance.

He opens his mouth to ask again, but then, out of the cacophony, over barked German orders and the turmoil of noise, the voice of his dreams calls out for him.

“John Egan, your two o’clock!”

His head whips around to the other side, and time comes to a halt.

His knees almost give out.

It's him. It’s him, it's Gale, he’s alive. Alive!

Buck! He wants to shout, but his brain gives up on all attempts at coherence. Relief floods him like a river breaking through a dam. He grins wide enough to hurt his healing wounds. Nothing registers to his senses but Gale's small smile and the way he’s blinking the emotions out of his eyes.

“What took you so long?” Gale asks.

Bucky's legs carry him forward but his eyes follow him like a sunflower straining for the sun, and all the pain and suffering and the dark, dark pitches of cruelty are wiped out of his mind by Gale's light.

They're going to survive. If they're together, they're going to make it to the other side.

If there's one thing that can be said about the Luftwaffe guards, it's that they're efficient. Bucky is processed and given a handful of bandages within half an hour, then left to his own devices to deal with himself however he can. As all the harrowing events of the past week start to settle down in him like sediments, he feels his strength evaporate. Unconsciousness seems impending. He can see Gale walking towards him. Just a few more steps, he thinks and grits his teeth to stagger forward on his feet.

Gale seems to pick up on his struggle because he breaks into a jog, and then there's Crank, Murph and Glen too, and DeMarco, and it's all going to be okay now, Bucky knows. He can let go. The world starts spinning in front of his hazy eyes and he lists forward just in time for Gale to catch him and sling Bucky's arm around his shoulders. He holds on to Bucky's waist so tightly that it hurts the cracked ribs but Bucky doesn't care enough to hiss.

"Easy there." Gale's deep, lovely voice tells him, and Bucky smiles again.

He drops his forehead to the side of Gale's head. "You're not real."

Gale walks towards one of the barracks with him slowly. "'Course I am."

"Then where have you been?" Bucky mumbles. Something wet spills down his face. He doesn't feel anything anymore. Not a damn thing.

Crank and the boys reach them before Gale could answer, and DeMarco moves to take Gale's place. "Let me take over."

Bucky grips Gale's clothes as though his life depended on it. At the moment, it feels like it does. Gale winces and pries Bucky's fingers off his shoulder to hold his wrist. "We'll manage, Benny."

“But the doc said -”

“It’s fine.” Gale cuts him off decisively. He sounds tired, but Bucky still drinks up every word he says as if an angel sang to him. “Come on, John, just up the steps here.”

They walk him inside a room filled with so many bunk beds that there's barely any space left to get past them. They have to shuffle in sideways to take him to one of the bunks, and they lay him down on the lowest one because Gale says it's better if they don’t try to lift him. It’s only there that Bucky gives up and lets himself go limp as the darkness starts to close in.

He feels Gale's arms around him and the weight of a head on his shoulder, Gale's uneven exhales on his neck, but he’s too tired to hug him back. The world fades out. Dreamless oblivion awaits.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Bucky finds the real thing.

Chapter Notes

Someone should stop me... these chapters keep getting longer! 😩 warning for late night readers: this is 8k words.

This one is such an important chapter. I hope you guys like it! I made myself cry writing it...

Please read the tags again if you might be triggered by some topics. 🤦

The first few days in the stalag are a blur of confusion and pain. Dark, empty dreams when Bucky sleeps, a nightmare when he's awake. Gale told him he was real but it doesn't feel like he is. If he is, why doesn't he dream? If he isn't a mirage, why does he act like a ghost? Where's his amused smile, the warmth of his hands, the starlight from the sky of his eyes? Where are their dreams?

Bucky only begins to grasp how deep the roots of the problem run when his persistent headache finally begins to fade into a dull sensation in the background. It's been three days since he arrived, and he spent most of it laid out on a bunk, recovering. Gale stayed by his side almost all day but never alone with him. In a room shared with a dozen other soldiers, that isn't what stands out - it's the way he keeps finding bullshit excuses to have people around or to take a walk with them outside. He doesn't want to be alone with Bucky, that much would be clear even to the blind.

At first, the realization hurts like an open chest wound. It leaves Bucky wondering what he did wrong. Is this how Gale breaks up with him? Is he afraid of something? But soon enough, as his wounds heal, he realizes that this isn't about him at all - there's something wrong with Gale himself, and he doesn't want Bucky to know that it's eating him alive.

The moment he reaches that conclusion, all of Bucky's pains cease at once, overpowered by the force of his worry. Somewhere deep inside, he feels like he already knows what happened. From the way Gale

keeps scratching at the crook of his left elbow, or how he rubs at his temples sometimes as though he had a headache rivalling Bucky's own. Or even from those last, tired moments before lights out when he bounces his right knee like he wants to run away from the dark. There's a word in Bucky's mind for the shattered fragments he sees held together by the thin glue of Gale's self-control, but it's a word he refuses to accept. They couldn't have done that to his Gale, it must not be true. Torture is fruitless on a man like him, they must have known. They must have.

But the signs don't lie.

There are moments when the cracks are exposed. The times when Gale stops moving in the middle of a game of cards just to stare into space, or when DeMarco tells him he'll walk with him if Gale needs some fresh air. When Gale disappears for an hour only to come back with extra medical supplies, supposedly for the room but some of them disappear into his coat. The clues all add up. Bucky can't fool himself into ignorance.

He remembers the hysterical crying on the train a few days ago and the nausea of his concern threatens to overcome him.

He needs a chance to assess the damage. If only Gale let him.

It's his fifth miserable night in the camp when he decides that enough is enough. Everyone is snoring around them, some even in the same bed to share the heat. No one's going to pay attention if Bucky climbs in next to Gale and asks him what's going on. They're not going to hear. With that thought in mind, Bucky pulls himself out of the lowest bunk and stands up as silently as he can. No one stirs. The night spans around them in an oblivious, gentle lull.

He finds Gale rubbing his eyes in the bunk above Bucky's, unaware that he's watched. His coat is draped over him like a second blanket, his free hand fisted in it. Bucky feels a painful sting in his heart at the sight. A half-forgotten memory flashes behind his eyes.

"I could get used to this." Gale told him on a cold night in Nebraska, when they had snuck into a fort to have sex and Bucky draped his sheepskin over him as they held each other in the afterglow. They were in the nose, watching the moon through one of its windows. Bucky leaning back against a wooden box and Gale between his legs, his naked back pressed to Bucky's chest. He was so warm. So perfect, as if made to fit in Bucky's arms. His head rested on Bucky's shoulder,

and he squeezed Bucky's hand when Bucky nuzzled his hair.

"I thought you hated my jacket." Bucky murmured through a smile against Gale's forehead.

"I do." Gale's voice rumbled in his embrace. "But I reckon we can call a truce tonight."

Bucky kissed the patch of skin closest to his mouth just because he could. Sweat stuck salty-sweet to his lips. "How come?"

Gale's answering sigh was happy and relaxed. "I like sleeping under jackets."

Bucky let out a quiet laugh. It delighted him whenever Gale revealed an unexpected quirk. It made him feel like the keeper of Gale's secrets, a dragon with a hoard of treasure. "Why?"

He felt Gale shrug. He was thumbing at the soft inside of Bucky's sheepskin as if it was a pet. Bucky could feel his fingers move against the back of his hand. "When I slept on benches in parlors and pony tracks as a kid, I used to take Dad's coat. Made me feel safe."

Bucky's smile fell. He tucked his nose into the crook of Gale's neck. "I'll keep you safe."

"Hm. Get me into trouble, more likely." Gale rubbed Bucky's forearms. "There's nothing safe in what we signed up for, John."

As usual, he was right. Bucky couldn't keep him away from the enemy's hands, and he couldn't keep him unscathed no matter how many times he kissed a lucky stone, prayed to fate or put good luck charms in Gale's pockets. They're prisoners of war now, and Gale is clinging to an illusion of safety from a childhood habit as though it could protect him from the demons he seems to fear at night.

Bucky reaches out and touches his arm.

Gale jumps, startled, but he composes himself quickly. It's hard to tell in the dim light, but at least he doesn't sound like he has been crying. A small measure of relief. "You okay, John?"

"Yeah." Bucky whispers back. "Think I could fit in there with you?"

Wordlessly, Gale shifts to lie on his side and scoots back to the wall. Bucky settles down in the narrow space freed up beside him, draping

his own blanket over himself and sneaking a hand under Gale's to find his fingers. They're ice-cold. He rubs them back to life.

“You can’t sleep?” He murmurs.

“No.” Gale admits.

“Does it help if I'm here?”

“No.”

That throws Bucky off. He falters. He thought he could offer solace, that he could help - the feeling of utter uselessness tastes bitter on his tongue. His hold on Gale's hand isn’t reciprocated. Gale doesn’t pull away, but he isn’t quite present either, as though he shut himself away.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Not true. I can tell, you know. What happened to you?” Bucky whispers as quietly as he can. He hopes it sounds like he means it, out of concern and not as a demand. “I miss you.”

The rhythm of Gale's breathing breaks, then resumes. “Don't say that.”

“Why not? I miss the cabin -”

“Just don’t.”

The silence feels like a rupture in the intricate fabric of their bond. Bucky pulls at its threadbare edges in the hopes that he can repair it. “Why aren't you sleeping?”

“I can sleep if I take a pill.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.” Gale's lips stay sealed, but the fingers in Bucky's grip curl. “Did they do something to you?”

Gale moves his thumb against Bucky's. It takes him a moment to answer. “I'll tell you tomorrow, okay?”

No, it's not okay. Bucky needs to hear it now, for the doubts to be cleared once and for all. But he can also feel Gale's tension, and he doesn’t want to fight it like some battering ram. This shouldn't be a siege, he thinks. He wants Gale to open the gates himself.

“Okay.” He says.

Gale relaxes. His hand flexes under the blanket until his fingers slip into the gaps between Bucky's to hold on. “Go back to your bunk.”

Despite everything, Bucky smiles. “You’re not the boss of me, Cleven.”

“That so?” He can hear Gale’s smile, and for a moment, it's as if everything is back to normal. “Yet, you always let me take the left seat.”

Bucky shivers. Even in their miserable circumstances, the barest hint of arousal simmers in his blood. He knows what Gale means. “Doesn’t make you the boss.”

“Hm-m.” Gale hums. “I'm gonna kick you out at dawn.”

“Roger that.” Bucky grins and closes his eyes to sleep.

True to his word, Gale does nudge him awake and out of his bunk a few hours later. It’s still dark, and Bucky's too out of it, too deeply entangled in the vines of sleep to think about anything but its sweet unconsciousness, so he crawls back into his bed and continues his hollow dream as if nothing interrupted it in the first place. The next time he wakes up, a faint sliver of light finds its way inside through the window and the tattered curtain. The rest of the guys are still asleep, but when Bucky checks, he finds Gale's bunk empty.

Time for that conversation then. He puts on his outer layers and goes to search for him.

He finds him sitting on the stairs outside the barrack, enveloped by the sluggish morning light. His face is tilted up to it as though he thought he could drift in its rays like a handful of dust and fly away. Around them, the camp is quiet and still. Only the guards stand alert, high up in their awful watchtowers. Gale's hair looks limp and dull in the pale October sunshine. His elbows rest on his pulled-up knees. If they could still dream, Bucky knows he’d be in the attic, hiding away.

“Hey, Buck.” He says mildly as he walks down the steps to stand in front of Gale.

“Morning, John.”

“Think we could find a quiet place to talk?” He squints at the Germans, a displeased frown on his face. “Those guards up there make me itchy.”

Gale’s lips thin. “It’s fine.”

“All right.” Bucky gives in. Hearing the story is more important to him than the circumstances. He doesn’t know why Gale wants to do it out here in the open, but he won't push it. He toes at a rock on the ground, his hands on his hips, then crosses his arms. “Let’s cut to the chase. What's wrong, huh? What does DeMarco know that I don’t?”

Gale jerks his head towards the stairs. “Come, sit down.”

“I don’t want to sit down.” When Gale just keeps staring at him in silence, Bucky sighs. “Okay. I'll sit down.”

He throws himself down on the step next to Gale and gives him an expectant look. After a moment, Gale nods in the way one does before starting something they've been putting off for too long. He shrugs his coat off. Then up rolls the left sleeve of his sweater, his shirt cuff is loosened, and the fabric slides up over a pale forearm, over skin that Bucky's lips used to trace from the line of Gale's watch to his ticklish elbow, over the soft crook of it - and there, Bucky's gaze stops, horrified.

Bruise upon bruise mars Gale's arm there, the puncture wounds of needles stabbed too harshly, without care into a vein. Blues, greens and fading browns like a mournful autumn landscape. They both look at it in silence. Gale's right hand reaches out to touch it but he fights the urge. Instead, he drags his blunt nails down his forearm and grits his teeth.

“They won't stop itching.”

“Jesus Christ, Buck.” Bucky swears, rubbing a hand over his face. His fingers shake from the violent anger coursing through him. He wants to caress the abused skin to make it better, but he’s afraid of causing Gale pain.

“They're not infected. Just slow to heal.”

“Well, ain't that great. All good then.”

“Calm down.”

“How the hell am I supposed to calm down?”

Gale pulls his clothes back down but leaves his coat draped on the steps. The sunshine is warm enough to soak into his sweater. He hugs himself. “I'm fine.”

“Like hell you are.”

“Well, I'll be.”

Bucky takes a deep breath, then another. He knows now why Gale wanted to do this here - he wanted the threat of the guards on them to keep Bucky from losing it and doing something crazy. He can barely keep it together as it is. What can he do with his anger without an outlet? Where does the pain go? He white-knuckles the wooden step on either side of his thighs.

“They did it to get to me, didn't they?”

Gale nods, staring into the yard unseeing. “They tried the soft approach first, but switched it up when I gave them nothing.”

Bucky tries to swallow back his pain. It’s all his fault. If he had been with Gale when he went down, none of this would have happened to him. If he hadn't been his soulmate, they wouldn’t have hurt him like this.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He asks eventually.

“I didn't know what to say.”

They look at each other. The shadow of a similar conversation passes between them, a thousand years away. The road ahead seems to have become only longer since then. Home sank beyond the curve of the horizon. Perhaps, they're flying in the opposite direction.

“What did they give you?” Bucky asks.

“I don’t know.” Gale waves his hand helplessly, gesturing at the marks hidden under his sweater. “The first one always knocked me out. But there were more, I could tell when I woke up.”

He bites his lip. “They spent hours during the day drilling their questions in me. Then made me sleep.”

Bucky grits his teeth.

“I had these vivid nightmares every night.” Gale continues, eyes glazed over as his focus turns inward. “Sometimes, they hurt, sometimes… sometimes, I couldn't move an inch and the dream went up in flames. I couldn't think straight. I screamed for you.”

Bucky can’t breathe. He feels hot tears of anger prickle at his eyes, and the vein in his temple throbs, but he stares at the watchtower and reminds himself that he’s still more useful to Gale alive than shot like a rabid dog.

“I knew you couldn’t hear me, but it wasn't easy.” Gale sighs. When Bucky feels the weight of his gaze, he looks at him. It seems to reassure Gale.

“Breakfast was always a dose of Kraut truth serum. Mescaline, the doc calls it. That was… something.” Gale's blue eyes go crazy-wide for a second. “I thought I was losing it, John. Saw these checkerboards, stripes, tunnels, moving dots everywhere. The walls, the floor, my own hands. They crawled around like bugs on a carcass.” He closes his eyes and shudders.

“I really thought I was going loony. But when they figured out why it wasn't working, they stopped wasting their drugs on me.”

Bucky frowns. “What do you mean?”

Gale runs a hand through his hair. The muscles of his jaw shift wildly before he looks up again. “I shut you out of my mind.”

Liquid ice slides down the back of Bucky's neck. “What?”

“There are ways to sever a connection -”

“But that might be permanent.”

Gale nods. He sounds calm. So infuriatingly calm. “I know.”

The silence rings in Bucky's ears sharper and sharper until it feels deafening. He's suddenly a teenager, hunched over a book in the library, sick at the thought of causing a thirteen-year-old pain. He can’t remember what was in the section about reversing it. Only the warnings flash in his mind. He knows where the splitting headache comes from now, and the ebb and flow of nausea. Although it's unfair, for the first time in his life, he’s so angry with Gale that he can barely stand his presence.

“You couldn’t have done that in one night.” His voice wavers from suppressed emotion.

“No.” Gale says. “I started after Algeria.”

“Algeria?”

Gale bounces his leg, but just once, as though he’s gripping his own composure with an iron fist. “I realized that it was all just luck. Staying up in the air. It terrified me that we almost went down that day.”

Bucky swallows. That, he knew.

“I wanted to protect you.” Gale says. “So I started building walls and doors between us. Kept it a secret. You always came straight to me so you never noticed.”

That tears a rueful chuckle out of Bucky. Had he been less blinded by love, he might have noticed what was going on. “You’ve always been good at dreambuilding.”

“Yeah, I was.” They share another look. Longing mirrors regret, guilt meets forgiveness.

“You locked the doors when they captured you, didn't you?”

There’s a pause, then Gale adds a quiet admission. “And I burnt the house. I burnt it all.”

Bucky's inhale is a sharp realization. He *saw* that. He got through there for a moment. That was the destruction he saw, just before Gale completely shut him out. “But it's a dream. You can resculpt it.”

“Maybe.” Gale says.

Bucky drops his head into his hands. He forces himself to put it aside because who cares about the panic in his chest, or the word *permanent permanent permanent* flashing in his mind, when Gale was tortured and can’t even go to sleep without a pill now. Still, the pain of his own loss overwhelms him, and it doesn’t help that all the fury in his heart - at the Germans, at the situation, at Gale, at himself - it keeps swirling around in his chest like an inferno but he can’t let it out.

“I'm sorry.” Gale says. He puts his hand on Bucky’s back. “I'm trying to repair it. It’s gonna be fine.”

“What if you can’t do it?” Bucky mumbles into his hands, pressing a stray tear into his skin before it could ever see daylight.

Gale's hand squeezes his shoulder. “Then we'll have to live with that too.”

As days stretch into weeks into months, Gale's physical health improves, but mentally, they're both fraying at the edges from the difficulties of camp life and the continuous failure they experience every night. The doors between their dreams might as well have been melted shut, they can’t open them. No matter how Bucky tries from his side, they won't budge. He suspects that under the agony he suffered, Gale fused those doors into solid walls and would need something to help him blast them open, but nothing gives them that kind of hope in the icebox of the stalag.

Behind Gale's back, Bucky talks to the doctor too. Asks him to tell him everything he knows about this mescaline and how it affects the senses, whether it can interfere with one's ability to dream, but almost every answer he gets boils down to “it depends”. Depends, depends, depends. Bucky feels like it's helplessness that will drive him insane. His own stability *depends* on Gale. Sometimes, it seems like everyone's does. And Gale depends on his own ability to shake those experiences off. He doesn’t know where Gale finds the strength to carry it all.

Eventually, all the guys hear about the drugs as one or two similar cases pop up at camp and Gale is always the first to help them. As the symptoms become only bad memories of the past, Gale opens up about it too, when they all end up sharing their stories of their capture on a dark night in the hut. But no one knows about the damaged soulbond. It’s private. Their secret. Their burden to carry. No one sees the dejection in Gale's eyes in the first few seconds after he wakes up, and they don't know what it means if they catch him mumbling an apology instead of saying good morning to John. Someone jokes about him probably kicking in his sleep. Bucky doesn’t like it, but Gale seems grateful for the joke. He leans into it and lets the rumour spread. Yes, he kicks in his sleep. Sure, maybe he throws his arms around too. Elbows Bucky in the gut. Why not? It’s better than letting the boys see that he’s struggling to repair the path to his soul. A path he destroyed himself.

A few days before Christmas, after a night of complete failure, Gale doesn't turn around to look at Bucky in the morning. He stays curled up, facing the wall, a hand covering his eyes. After a quick glance around to make sure no one's paying them attention, Bucky leans over him, squeezes his arm and whispers in his ear.

"Come on, Buck. It's okay. I know you can do it. Just give it time." He rubs Gale's biceps. "We're gonna get through this. Don't you stop believing that."

It draws a chuckle out of Gale. He drops his hand to reveal a sad smile. "Careful. I'm getting déjà-vu."

"Good." Bucky smiles back, thinking of Algeria, the warmth of the sand, Gale kissing the back of his neck. "Could use some of that African heat now."

Gale's smile widens.

In spite of all the promises of cold beer and Valhalla, Algeria was a far cry from comfort. But what it was, was hot. Scorching. Even as the temperatures cooled a few degrees out there in the open at night, everything still oozed the warmth of the day. They didn't have proper quarters, just some makeshift camp beds set up in an old, dilapidated hangar, and barely enough water to wash their faces. Showers were out of the question. The dirt and sweat of the mission clung to them, dried on their skin like a layer caked around their bodies. New rivulets of sweat drew lines in it like rivers on a map. They shed their clothes down to their undershirts to cope with the heat, and Bucky, as always, found himself unbearably aroused by it. He needed relief so bad he could barely function until he got it.

After they had made sure all the men found a place to settle down, he pulled Gale aside just outside the hangar, all but vibrating from need.

"Buck." He whispered, squeezing Gale's arm. He bit his lip. "Can we?"

Gale looked amused. Desire flashed in his eyes, but he dragged his feet. "Not a good place, Bucky."

"We could go behind that building." Bucky inclined his head at the small, empty office to the right of the hangar.

Gale's pink tongue wet his lips as if to tempt Bucky further to lean down and suck on it. "We're filthy."

“Just your hand.” Bucky pleaded. The adrenalin of the day pumped through his blood in massive waves of excitement. “Will be quick, I promise. Please.”

“My hand, huh?” Gale raised an eyebrow at him, clearly pleased to be wanted with such shameless desperation. After a moment, he nodded. “Suppose that can be arranged.”

Bucky grinned. He was so happy he could sing. “2300. I'll wait for you there.”

Gale gave him a playful look, then shook his head and went back to the men. Collected as ever while Bucky was a mess. But that was okay. As long as Gale wanted him nevertheless.

They met behind the building as planned. Bucky was already there fifteen minutes earlier than agreed, leaning against the warm stone of the building and staring up at the stars, taking a pull of his smoke every now and then. The breeze caressed his bare arms.

When Gale walked into his line of sight with his hands on his hips, he beamed at him. “Fancy seeing you here, Major.”

“Well. Had to make sure you wouldn’t die on me.” Gale said, as though he needed an excuse to be there and the fact that Bucky wanted to have sex with him didn't justify it to him well enough.

“It was a close call.” Bucky joked, letting Gale walk up to him at his own pace even though his entire body screamed at him to just tackle him into the sand. “Still is, in fact -”

But then Gale was there, in his arms, kissing his flirting words off his lips and licking into his mouth, and Bucky could throw himself into it without reservations, secure in the knowledge that Gale would always hold him up. He ran both of his hands through Gale's wind-ruffled hair and kissed and kissed and kissed him until Gale pulled away and spun him around.

“Not gonna risk my uniform tonight.” He mouthed against Bucky's neck as he rolled up Bucky's undershirt and reached for his trousers.

Bucky put both of his palms on the wall and watched those deft fingers flick his belt open, then unbutton his fly. When they pulled his cock out of his underwear, he shuddered and whined.

Gale pressed right up against his back, his own hardness against

Bucky's ass and his free arm holding Bucky around the chest. He spat into his hand and started stroking Bucky with twisting, efficient pulls, working him towards a quick relief. “Stay quiet.”

Bucky groaned. His hips twitched to thrust into Gale's tight fist. He was so close to the precipice that the slick sounds alone would have been enough to get him off. His mouth hung open as he watched the silhouette of Gale's hand move up and down his length, from root to tip. “I'm fed up with staying quiet.”

Gale hummed. He stopped his hand right under the crown of Bucky's cock and rubbed the tip with his thumb, ignoring the way Bucky squirmed at the pleasure-pain of it. “I can always leave.”

“No.” Bucky gasped. His hips moved in a frantic plea to get Gale moving again. “No, I'll be good.”

Gale kissed the back of his neck. “Good.”

His hand resumed its strokes.

As Bucky predicted, it didn’t take long. He was so keyed up he felt like he was going blind with it, and all he could do was pant and swallow his moans as Gale worked him over and pushed him past that sweet edge just the way he liked it. He came shaking all over the wall, biting down on his own fist to keep quiet, then hung his head and laughed as Gale pulled away and wiped his hand with a handkerchief.

“I needed that.” He smiled, tucking himself away, then draped himself over Gale again. He could feel heavy relaxation spread through his limbs and stomach. “Your turn.”

Gale turned away from him but he leaned into Bucky's embrace when Bucky hugged him from behind. “I'm good.”

Bucky rocked him in place, feeling all giddy with that deep-seated satisfaction he always got out of having sex with Gale. His arms were tight around Gale's torso. “Are you sure?” He licked the shell of Gale's ear. “I don’t mind getting dirty.”

Gale snorted. “Does sex make you drunk?”

Bucky bit him on the shoulder. “You do.” He moved back up to Gale's ear, breathing warmth into it. “I love you.”

“Yeah?”

He peppered kisses all over Gale's cheek, high on the rush of happiness coursing through him. “Tell me you love me too.”

Gale rubbed the back of Bucky’s hands where they held him around the waist. “I'll tell you when you've come to your senses.”

It made Bucky huff a quiet laugh. “I do mean it. Why don’t you ever believe me?”

There was a pause then, and he could feel the tension tightening in Gale's spine. He couldn't see his face but he could tell that his smile disappeared. “I believe you mean it.”

“Then what holds you back?”

“Nothing.”

Bucky breathed out. He felt a tinge of frustration and wished it hadn't been so hard to pull Gale's feelings out of him. Every confession he earned came like victory after a gruelling battle, never easy, never as a gift. “Come on. I want to know now.”

“You don’t have to know everything.”

Bucky sighed. He rested his head against Gale's. “Don't close yourself off. I know this was a close one, but we made it. We're here. You flew that plane across the sea.”

They stood there for a moment, just breathing in and out together before Gale spoke again. “I don’t think you and I mean the same thing when we say it.”

That hurt. “You think I don't know what love means?”

“How long have you felt this way?”

The question caught Bucky off-guard. He didn't know how to answer. There wasn't a single moment that he could pinpoint as a turning point. Falling in love with Gale felt like sinking into a warm bath. It was slow and easy, and once he let himself feel it, it cradled him from head to toe. “I don’t know. It crept up on me.”

Gale went quiet and still for a drawn-out moment. Bucky still remembers how it felt to hold him there. How vast all that empty space around them felt, the desert and the night sky, with almost no life to break up its immense plains. With only the moonlight to see

them, as usual, he felt safe and free to say what he wanted, to love Gale how he needed.

“I've loved you since I was seventeen.” Gale confessed, and his words faded into the languid wind that whirled around them. They were so heavy that the only way he could say them was without any emphasis at all. Like breathing, they slipped out of his mouth and took flight.

“Before we even met?”

“I didn't need to know your face to love you.” And there was an accusation there, an insecurity Bucky hadn't even considered up to that point.

He took half a step back to turn Gale around. “Wait. Do you think I only love you for your looks?”

“I don’t know.” Gale's shoulders pulled up towards his ears defensively, but he didn't brush Bucky's hands off them. “I just don’t know what changed. You never looked for me when we were younger. You didn't want me for years, then -” He snapped his fingers. “I break up with Marge and there you are. Sweeping in as if you'd been waiting.”

“I was waiting.”

“You were out there picking up girls left and right, drinking yourself into a stupor, making stupid bets as though you had nothing to lose, then suddenly, you were telling me you were mine. Do you know how that feels?”

Looking back, Bucky wishes he had done it differently. Why was he so afraid to feel this for another man? He never cared much for rules, why did he hold on so long to this one? As the pressure of captivity grounds them all down to their cores, he wishes he could make Gale believe that it wasn't a sudden change of heart. That he has always been Gale's, he just didn't know it.

“I was an idiot.” He replied that night in Algeria. When he kissed Gale, he got a kiss back. “Tell me you love me.”

Gale looped his arms around Bucky's neck. “No.”

Bucky smiled. “I already know you do.”

“No need to say it then.”

He kissed Gale again, and they made out behind that empty building until their lips went numb. They haven't talked about that conversation since then.

Did Gale already know what he was going to do in their dreams? Did he already make his plan? Did he think about it when he went to sleep in the hangar that night? Bucky wonders if he regrets it now.

Christmas Eve is a grim affair when they can barely endure the cold and the howling wind that batters the thin walls of their hut. Crank and DeMarco share some nice anecdotes from last year, while Brady coughs through his miserable chest cold. Bucky sits with Gale by the window, their knees pressed together, just listening quietly until the boys turn in one by one and bid each other good night. Only a few candles stay lit in the middle of the table, flickering lights. Bucky moves to his bunk then and fishes out the bar of precious chocolate he’s been hiding for long, long weeks now.

“Merry Christmas.” He whispers when he sits back down, handing it over to Gale.

Gale's hands smooth over it as though it’s the most valuable gift he has ever received. He holds it to his chest and sniffs, nodding at Bucky. He gives him a small, lopsided smile. “You couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

Bucky grins. He has never been good at waiting. He doesn’t expect anything in return, but Gale reaches into his coat and pulls something out of the inner pocket he asked Brady to sew in it. “Merry Christmas, John.”

It's a knit cap. One of the most valuable things in this unforgiving winter chill, and somehow, Gale got one for him. It must have cost him a lot of barter stock. The thought brings a wave of emotion to Bucky's throat that he can’t let himself examine, not here, not now. He swallows, pulls the hat on, then musters a smile.

“So? Would the dames like the look?”

Gale smiles, his teeth a perfect line. He leans his head against the

wall. Stares at Bucky lazily, with warmth in his eyes. “I'm sure they would.”

Bucky watches him for a long moment, then stands up and blows out all the candles except one. He brings it over to them and holds it out for Gale. “I know it's a few days early, but I only had one present, so… happy birthday.”

Gale blinks at it, overwhelmed. He glances up at Bucky, then closes his eyes and blows out the flame.

In the darkness, Bucky hears himself whisper. “What did you wish for?”

“I don’t wish on things, John.”

“Only on shooting stars, huh?”

Gale breathes out. He rubs his knee against Bucky's. “Just the once.”

In March, the guards find their radio.

It's a devastating loss. Without it, they're completely cut off from the world, without news, without an end in sight. Every day drags on with more weight than the day before, every bite of bland food tastes staler, every step forward feels like one step back. Gale comes up with the idea of creating their own device, and his brilliant mind works on it tirelessly day and night, but when the time comes to test it, it fails.

It upsets Gale like nothing has in months. Bucky tries to make it better in the only way he can - by pouring affection on him.

There has been a distance between them lately, a dissonance they haven't been able to resolve because Gale doesn’t talk about anything anymore. He keeps everything bundled up in his chest and lives as if his only purpose is to keep them all alive until the end of this hell, while Bucky feels himself slip away. His personality is chipped away like pieces of a stone crack under the pressure of a chisel, and he doesn’t recognize himself anymore. He has slowly begun to accept that he’ll never get his soulbond back, and the thought of that loss

leaves him bitter.

But none of this matters when the radio fails. He sees the way Gale's hand shakes, and the frustration in his eyes, and knows that he needs to find some relief.

They get their chance the next day. The weather is finally good enough for a ball game, and everyone leaves the barracks with the first emotion akin to excitement they've felt in months. Everyone, except Gale. He says he’s busy reading but might join them later, and he stays behind in his bunk. Bucky seizes his opportunity.

He follows the others to the yard and fakes interest just long enough not to raise suspicion, then tells them he’s gonna try to persuade Gale to come out of his hermit cave and walks back to the hut. When he’s back inside and the door closes behind him, it hits him that this is the first time they've been alone in private in months.

He walks over to Gale, sits on the bunk he’s stretched out on and pulls the book out of his hands. He drops it on the thin mattress of his own bed. Its dull thud sounds loud in the silence. When he leans over Gale with his forearms propped up on either side of Gale's head, Gale touches his neck.

“Don't you have a game to watch or something?”

Bucky smiles. “I have better things to do.”

“Better than sports?” Gale's lips start to curl up too. “I'll be damned.”

Bucky chuckles and presses his lips to Gale's. They're soft and warm, and they move to match his touch before he pulls away just an inch. “Am I still allowed to do this?”

Gale slides both of his arms around his neck. “Always.”

They share slow, wet kisses that turn wilder and hungrier with every minute until they're drinking each other's gasps and moans as their mouths move in a familiar rhythm together. Bucky shifts to lie on top of Gale and parts his thighs with his hips and a gentle hand, stroking Gale's left leg as he starts grinding down like they used to, in better beds, in their forts or in a pile of hay. It's almost good enough to make him forget they aren't free. Gale's fingers grip the back of his jacket tight, and he pants through his nose as Bucky nuzzles his neck and kisses a path down his throat.

But when Bucky sneaks a hand between them to open Gale's trousers, he finds him completely soft. No sign that he's aroused. It only makes him pause for a split second though. He figures it's only a matter of stimulation, and it's still quite cold in the room, it's only natural that it takes a while. But Bucky knows what Gale likes, he can get him there fast. He moves his mouth back to Gale's lips and licks between them, moaning happily when Gale's tongue finds his, and he starts rubbing Gale through his underwear in the way that usually gets Gale going. Bucky's own cock is weeping in sympathy, confined in his suddenly tight pants, but even after a few minutes of trying, Gale doesn't harden at all.

When Gale reaches down and tries to pull Bucky's hand away by the wrist, Bucky falters. "Do you need my mouth?" He kisses Gale's cheek. "I can do that too."

But Gale just stares up at him with a deep, pained frown, then starts hyperventilating. He pushes Bucky off, sits up and scoots to the edge of the bed, his head in his trembling hands, and his ears turn flaming red.

Alarmed, Bucky pushes himself up too to sit next to him. He strokes Gale's back. "Buck, it's okay, we don't have to if you don't want to. I just wanted to make you feel better."

"I want to." Gale says, and his voice sounds wrecked. As if he's hanging on by a thread. "But I can't."

Bucky winces. Admittedly, it has never happened to him before, but he knows how this icy purgatory wears them all down. Some can't find the strength to get up when it's so futile to get through the day. Perhaps, some can't connect the desires of their mind to their body anymore. "It's okay."

Gale shakes his head and drops his hands to grip the wooden edge of his bunk. His eyes are squeezed shut but wetness leaks out from under the curtains of his eyelashes, painting them dark and drawing tracks down his face. The salty rivulets of his tears trickle down to his kissed-pink lips like rain tracing the curve of a rose petal. Some roll down his nose and cling to its tip until he covers his mouth to try to muffle a sob.

"I can't do anything anymore." He cries, heaving in huge gulps of air to try to control his emotions again. "I can't get it up, can't dreamwalk, can't even build a goddamn radio even though I could do

it when I was fucking nine. I'm sorry.” His voice cracks. “I'm sorry.”

“No. No, don't be sorry.” Bucky murmurs, his heart breaking like a glass thrown against a wall.

He wraps one arm around Gale and uses the other to hold his hand, and Gale continues to shake in his embrace as completely silent sobs rack him. Bucky has never seen him like this outside of their dreams. He wishes he could take Gale back to his attic and help him let it out there, but that place doesn’t exist to them anymore. Perhaps, with all his efforts concentrated on getting their connection back, Gale didn't dream up a new comfort place for himself, and the emotions had nowhere to go but out, out in the open. Here they are now, spilling through the cracks.

“I lost everything and it's my own goddamn fault.” Gale heaves, his right hand limp in Bucky's grip. The other gestures around in angry, uncoordinated waves. He's shaking all over. “The only thing I've ever wished for was for my soulmate to love me and I don’t even have a bond anymore.”

He stops breathing for a long beat, and the pain crashes through him over and over again. “I just wanted to protect you.” He swallows around the flood of tears. “I'm sorry, John, I'm sorry.”

“Shh.” Bucky curls both arms around him and holds him as tightly as he can. He closes his own eyes for a moment, trying not to lose it himself when Gale needs him so desperately to be the strong one for once. “That's nonsense, Gale.”

Gale turns his wet face into Bucky's neck and continues crying. Bucky strokes his hair, then down over his neck to the small of his back. He repeats the touch again. “You’re still my soulmate.”

The trembling of Gale's body quiets down, but there are still new tears soaking into Bucky's collar.

“I don’t need you to prove it. I don't need to see your dreams or to be with you when I'm asleep.”

The realization crystallizes in Bucky's mind as he says it. They lost their connection more than half a year ago, and never once did he really let himself think about what it meant to live without it, but he does now. You don’t need dreams when your heart knows.

“What I feel is proof enough.” He rocks Gale until Gale’s arms finally

find the strength to hug him back.

“You’ll always be my soulmate.” He takes a deep breath, and feels like something slides into place, the last piece in a mosaic of feelings, hopes and memories.

He remembers that night in Thorpe Abbotts when Gale told him how he had looked up at the sky, a beaten and lonely kid, and wished on a rock disintegrating on that black canvas for a person to love him without conditions or demands, through all the pain life may throw at him. The only wish he had ever made. He remembers Gale in Algeria, telling him that Bucky didn't know the kind of love Gale held for him, and Bucky knows now that he was right all along. Because that love needed him to comprehend its depth first before it could ever form in his mind.

But he feels it now.

“I love you.” He tells Gale quietly. “And I will still love you when all this ends, one way or another.”

He lets the words sink into the silence. After a few minutes, Gale stops crying. He pulls back and wipes his face, looking into Bucky's eyes with his own red-rimmed from all the tears. “You actually mean it.”

“About time you realized.” Bucky smiles and kisses his tear-damp cheek. He rubs Gale's arms.

Gale gives him a forlorn look. “I don’t think I can open those doors.”

Bucky nods. It’s a bitter acceptance, but he’ll live it. It doesn’t change how he feels.

“You’re still my soulmate.” He repeats, then kisses Gale's cheek again. “My little kriegie Marconi.” He mouths against the blotchy skin, and it makes Gale chuckle. “My doll.”

Gale starts smiling again. “Always such a charmer.”

“My special talent.” Bucky leans back and meets Gale's eyes. Understanding passes between them, a heavy thought. When Gale kisses him, he lets him take his time, and lies back on the mattress when Gale's hands guide him down.

“Do you think we still have time for a second try?” Gale asks him, thighs moving to a straddle.

Bucky smiles. “Well, just gotta make it quick, I reckon.”

Gale nods and leans down.

Later, after lights out that night, Gale turns around to face him instead of letting Bucky spoon him from behind. He scoots as close as possible without kissing him and whispers into the space between them quietly enough that only the two of them hear.

“I dreamt about the lake last night. Where I used to take you when you needed to cool down.”

Bucky smiles, closing his eyes. “Was it nice?”

Gale hums. “I took a walk along the treeline.”

Bucky can see it in his mind's eye. The sunshine shimmering on the water, leaves whooshing in the wind, the grass tickling at his ankles. The smell of the forest and warm, wet earth. “Go on.”

“Did you know that it's a real place?”

“Guessed.” Bucky mumbles.

“My uncle used to take me there in the summer.” Gale says, a smile in his voice. “We'd ride across the valleys on horseback. Go fishing and hunting. We usually stayed at this old log house he had.”

Bucky opens his eyes again, but Gale's are closed. He doesn’t open them, just rubs the inside of Bucky's wrist and whispers about hazy summers in Wyoming, about the attic where he used to hide when his father came to visit or when he just wanted to read all day, and how warm the wood felt when the sunshine lit it golden through the circular window. He tells Bucky about the smell of the rain, and the texture of his horse's hair as he snuck out to ride into the woods despite the storm, and the way his uncle taught him how to start a campfire. How the smoke soaked into his hair.

It doesn’t take long before Bucky realizes what he's doing, and it fills him with gratitude deep down to his bones.

“I love that log house.” He starts, and knows it's the right call when Gale's hold around his wrist tightens.

“Tell me what it looked like to you.” He murmurs.

So Bucky does. He tells him about the flowers and the dew on the grass, the fresh laundry that always blinded him when it reflected the sunshine, the scent of detergent, the river rolling pebbles down from the mountain and that looming peak in the distance that always called to him to climb it. He talks about the cozy warmth of the house and how the stairs creaked, the play of dust particles as he crawled through the clutter. How much he loved it when Gale hugged him there. How different it felt.

When he stops talking, he realizes that Gale has fallen asleep, pale moonlight on his smile. And for the first time in his life, Bucky doesn’t see him simultaneously at seventeen, at thirteen, at twenty-two. He doesn’t see the reflections of their dreams behind him, or the cardboard copy representation of him in Bucky's mind. He sees him at twenty-five, broken and beautiful, and he’s the realest thing in the world. He's Bucky's soulmate, and he loves him more than any dream.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> I really tired myself out with this one... Be warned, it's an emotional rollercoaster! Very long again. There are two more chapters left.
>
> I wanted to thank all of you who left comments so far! It really means a lot.
>
> The lovely carnevol made a beautiful moodboard for this story, please check it out here on Tumblr. It made me so happy!

In the stalag, sleep is a sanctuary. It's an escape from their tedious decomposition, a chance to rebuild the dredges of their will to live and brace themselves for another day of rotting in their barbed wire cage. To most, it's a point of contact with the outside world, with someone waiting for them on the other side. To others, it's a time to recuperate and comfort their soulmate in captivity. But to Bucky, it's empty space.

Most nights nowadays, he doesn't even want it. He just lies in his bunk and stares at the play of light that sneaks into the barrack through the gap between the tattered curtain and the wall. Lately, he has been using the silence to reevaluate his life. He thinks about the way he felt as a teenager during the years he didn't know Gale, tries to remember how he survived the shimmering abyss that lay in the space where his soulmate would be one day. In the end, he realizes what made all the difference - hope. Back then, he could still hold out for the promise of finding that connection one day. But now, all hope is lost. He's sure his mom would have some wise old saying for him, something about not knowing the value of what you have until you lose it, but he lost her too a year ago, while he was in England, moving between near-death and the highest, brightest fires of love like a kid in a swing, unaware that he was going to fall out and land face down in the sand.

To Gale, sleep has become elusive.

Bucky knows. He can see it - the growing darkness around tired blue eyes, the ashen skin, eyelids drooping when the repetitiveness of their routine hits - but he can't help. As the temperature grows from the chill of a lingering winter to a mild, heady spring, they have no excuse to share a bunk anymore. They may be soulmates stuck in misery together, but people's tolerance can only go so far. They can't risk giving away that what they have binds them together tighter than a soulbond between friends.

Sometimes, long after the others have started snoring, far away in their own dreamscapes, Gale hangs his arm down from the bunk above Bucky's, and Bucky reaches up as if compelled by an unseen force he can't resist. He holds Gale's hand until Gale's fingers stop caressing his, limp in his sleep, then he lets them slide out of his grip gently and just stares at the silhouette of Gale's fingertips, the delicate curves, the draft of death whistling between his knuckles. What if those fingers never move again? Those nights, the only rest he gets is forced upon him by his crumbling body. Biology will make you carry on even if your mind isn't in it anymore.

On a morning after one of these dreadful nights, Bucky wakes up to the heavy thud of a body jumping down from the upper bunk. It's unusual for Gale to make so much noise, ever considerate of the boys and their rest, but the reason for his carelessness today becomes apparent a moment later, when hurried footsteps are followed by the clink of metal and loud, helpless retching. Bucky sits up and sees Gale bent over their bucket in the corner, throwing up. His face swims in sweat and bile clings to his lips. His eyes squeeze shut until the heaving subsides, then he opens them and glances at Bucky. His lips purse.

"Another one?" Bucky asks, heart sinking.

Gale closes his eyes again and straightens. He wipes his mouth, goes back to his bunk and starts throwing his clothes on. Now awake, everyone watches in various states of confusion and concern.

"Going to the doc?" Bucky prods, already moving to get dressed himself. When Gale hums in agreement, he nods. "I'll go with you."

"No." Gale says.

"Don't start -"

"I want to go alone."

Bucky swallows the answer that comes instinctually to his lips. They have an audience, and he can tell that Gale is more embarrassed than unwell, now that the wave of nausea passed. There's so little time they get alone, he probably just wants some space to gather himself. *It's not about me,* Bucky tells himself. It's not because Gale doesn't want him close anymore.

"Are you okay, Buck?" Crank asks as Gale throws on his sweater and grabs the dirty bucket to take it out with him.

Gale musters a tight smile. "Just a stomach bug. Nothing to worry about."

He gives the others a reassuring glance and leaves. Several pairs of eyes turn to Bucky, then flicker away. No one dares ask. They go about their morning routine as usual. Just pretend nothing happened and it might make it all right.

Later that day, Bucky sits on the steps leading to their barrack and stares into nothing, a favourite pastime for most guys stuck in the sluggish torture of this madhouse. He takes slow drags of his cigarette, a precious commodity he gets double of because Gale gives him all his rations of it. A beggar's riches, he thinks wryly. He's watching the treeline beyond the gates, as much as he can see it from his vantage point. Fresh spring leaves dancing in the sunshine. Do the songbirds sound like the ones in Wyoming? Is there a stream nearby?

He's shaken out of his daydream by light footsteps on the wood and a familiar body sitting close next to him. From the corner of his eye, he sees a match, a quick flame, moving to light the end of a pipe. In lieu of actual tobacco, Brady uses crushed cigarettes. Sometimes, when even those run out, he just holds the wooden mouthpiece between his lips and draws comfort from the memory of smoke in his lungs. It makes Bucky jealous. His own memories are hardly any good for solace here.

"Hey, Bucky." Brady says. When he talks to Bucky, his voice always sounds like he's reaching out - like he wants Bucky to reach back for him.

"How's it going, John?" Bucky says lightly, with a half-smile on his face. Brady's presence makes him feel a little better about everything. He doesn't care to examine why, but he's grateful for it.

"Same old." Brady snorts. "You know, watching grass grow. Waiting for newstime."

“Kriegie paradise.”

Brady makes that cynically amused sound again. “Let’s just hope it’s not for eternity.”

They fall silent for a moment. A blackbird lands on the strip of upturned earth between them and the fence, looking for worms. Upon finding none, it flies away, and for a second, Bucky lets himself imagine what it would be like to lift up just like that and leave this cemetery.

Brady puffs on his pipe beside him. “What’s wrong with Buck?”

“Nothing’s wrong with him.” Bucky says automatically.

“Then what was all that about this morning?”

“Mesca-dream.” Bucky mutters, then pulls numbing smoke into his mouth. His eyes burn from his own exhaustion. He wonders how Gale feels. He doesn’t know these days. The locked doors in their dreams seem to creep into their lives awake. More of them close day by day.

“What?”

“Mescaline dream.” Bucky says. That’s what he and Gale have taken to calling the nightmares poisoning Gale since the camp ran out of sleeping pills. It’s impossible to predict what triggers them. Sometimes, a guard would look too familiar or the chow taste a hint too bitter or the light would stream through the clouds a certain way, and Gale’s dreamscapes end up wobbling like a mass of water, drowning him, or funnels open under his feet, more hallucinations than dreams. Sometimes, the cobwebs and checkerboards and endless, self-looping patterns linger when he wakes up, and he gets nauseous.

Brady smokes his pipe, one of his legs tapping idly. “What does that mean?”

Bucky looks at him. The friendly concern staring back at him makes his chest ache. “It’s that Kraut truth serum they gave him. He has nightmares about it.”

“Yeah?”

Bucky stretches his long legs out, musing at the way the trousers fall loosely around his calves. “Everywhere he looks, he sees cobwebs, stripes, funnels. Shifting patterns, you know? They make him dizzy.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Can’t you just pull him into a different dream?”

That freezes Bucky’s inhale right in his throat. Dreamsharing is private, intimate - he doesn’t know if he could talk about it even with a friend as close as Brady is to him. He can’t just blurt out that he has a broken bond. He can’t cry about it and ask for advice. There’s no advice that could be given anyway. He tries to fake calm composure, shifting back to rest his elbows on a step behind him. “It’s complicated.”

Brady seems to hesitate. They sit there in quiet for a few minutes before he speaks again. “My soulmate sings to me when I have a nightmare.”

Bucky glances at him again and sees the blush creeping up his cheeks, but Brady goes on, apparently determined to say his piece in the hope that it will help Bucky and Gale. Grateful warmth spreads in Bucky’s torso, and the sudden urge to throw an arm around Brady rears its head. It’s been a while since he last felt the need to be friendly. He was starting to think he lost that part of himself completely.

“She sings these… lullabies.” Brady continues with a faint smile. “I can hear them even in the darkest dreams and follow her voice out.”

Bucky shares a long look with him, then nods, letting a cheeky grin stretch his lips. He drapes his arm over Brady’s shoulders. “Oh, I *could* sing to him. If that ain’t a nightmare, I don’t know what is.”

Brady grins back. “Might annoy him enough to snap him out of it.”

Bucky laughs. “I bet.” He looks at the treeline again, convincing even himself for a moment that what he says is still a possibility. “I bet it would.”

April washes over them with relentless rain and mud thick enough to make Bucky grit his teeth every time he has to walk out for an appell. They're confined inside most of the time, lying around and staring at

cards that are so worn that you can tell everyone's hand from the shape of the creases in the back of the paper. But when the skies clear up in May, they see nature coming awake from its long slumber. Patches of vibrant green grass grow where the soldiers' feet don't crush it into the sand, and small, white wildflowers bloom among its blades as if the earth envied the constellations of the night sky and wanted to compete.

Nevertheless, joy isn't something Bucky finds easily in the camp. He isn't like Gale, who can still smile at the same goddamn passage in the same goddamn book he has read a dozen times, or Crank, who beams every time someone says a kind word to him, or even DeMarco, who can lose himself staring at the first bees buzzing around in the stalag. No, Bucky can't find a pinch of happiness in himself. As if the person he used to be, the life of every party, has been flayed off him like the peel of an apple, and now he's down to flesh and core.

The only time he feels an illusion of joy is when Gale finds them a way to steal a precious moment alone. On a sunny day when most prisoners are in the yard, they hide in the empty library and press against its closed door to make out, sharing long, deep kisses that will dance on Bucky's lips the whole damn day even after they part. He hugs Gale close and loses all his senses to him. To the cushion of his lips and his cold hands as they wrap around Bucky's neck, to the tilt of his hips against Bucky's own. It's amazing.

But, of course, nothing good could ever last long here, in this dump. Reality crushes back around them too soon with the sound of passing footsteps. They jump away from each other, but when the person on the other side strolls past, Gale still smiles, showing Bucky some of that old, fading playfulness in his eyes.

"Do you need a minute?"

Bucky drops into one of the seats, legs parted, and runs a hand through the mess of his hair. "Make that about five."

Gale bites his lip to keep his smile from widening. He ambles closer, putting one of his feet on a chair and leaning on it as if to tempt Bucky with the lines of his legs, the curve of his back. "Five?"

Bucky tilts his head. He runs his gaze up and down Gale's body. "Three if you use your mouth."

Gale rocks in place. "Like the first time?"

A huff escapes Bucky's lips at the teasing. He's about to say something in his defense when steps approach anew, and the door swings open to reveal a pair of nervous lieutenants who falter at the sight of them already occupying the space. Gale takes his time to straighten up, letting the boys feel the gravity of his presence before he gives them a friendly nod, winks at Bucky and walks outside. Bucky stares after him with longing, barely aware of the greetings mumbled at him and the sound of books being pulled off the shelves.

Inevitably, his mind wanders.

Back to Nebraska, to the creaky bed of a hotel room, to sweaty blond hair parting for the comb of his fingers and cheeks glowing pink from the heat of exertion as his palms cupped them. He thinks of Gale's chest, rubbing damply against his own, dog tags brushing his skin back and forth with every thrust, and Gale's cock, the sweet, blunt pressure of it moving inside of him.

The first time he and Gale had sex, they had no idea what they were doing. Only two weeks after their first kiss, they managed to get away for a weekend together. Bucky knew he wanted *something,* but what exactly, he didn't know. They had a shared sex dream, the night that they first kissed, but they both woke up so messy and aroused, humping the bed, that they agreed to try to avoid that for the time being. And sex in dreamspace was drastically different from real intimacy. Asleep, it was all about sensations, and those departed from reality almost immediately. It felt like their bodies switched positions every other second at the blink of an eye. Everything felt good but nothing gave true satisfaction, and they just rolled around in a tangle of limbs until they woke up to the full force of a hunger that had to be satisfied in the real world.

So, Bucky wasn't sure how they'd do it outside of their dreams.

That night, in the seedy hotel they had chosen to make sure no one cared what they got up to, he swapped lazy kisses with Gale in one of the beds. They were down to their underwear, and Bucky was so achingly hard he thought he would lose it without a single touch down there. He had Gale on his back, and he leaned over him, running his palm up and down Gale's lean torso, noting each hill and groove, the hair on his chest and down low on his belly, the jut of his hips. He felt Gale's hands move over his back in return, and it encouraged him enough that after a few minutes, he slid a thigh between Gale's. He shifted until his cock pressed to Gale's leg through his skivvies, and Gale's brushed his hip.

“Hi.” He whispered breathlessly when he pulled back from their long kiss.

Gale had a teasing smile on his face. His hands pressed down on Bucky’s lower back. “We’ve had quite a thorough greeting already.”

Bucky grinned. They stared at each other like that until he realized that Gale wasn’t going to push things forward. He would have to do it himself. He cleared his throat. “So.”

“So.”

“How about we try what we did in that dream, you know. But awake.”

“What did we do?”

A chuckle burst from Bucky’s chest. “I don’t know, but it felt damn good.” He glanced at Gale’s lips, then back to his eyes again. “Do you know how to do this? With a man.” He stroked circles on Gale's arm with his thumb. “Never done that before. I've tried a lot of things, but not that.”

Gale gave him an amused smile, as though Bucky's fumbling entertained him. “I think you can figure it out.”

Bucky rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess someone has to… take it. And the other - well.”

Gale hummed. “Sounds about right.”

“Come on, Buck, help me out here, I don't know anything about this.”

“You think I do?” Gale huffed. “Well, I haven't done it either. You have more experience.”

They watched each other expectantly until Bucky cracked a smile. He pressed a kiss to Gale’s lips. “How about we start with what we do know?”

Gale smiled back. “Excellent idea.”

That’s how they ended up using their hands first, then their mouths, and only later in the night, when Bucky felt brave enough to offer, did they go all the way. Gale fucked him as if he was the one on the bottom, gasping desperately at every thrust as the pleasure sucked the breath out of him, and he held Bucky’s hand on the mattress like a lifeline, like he needed to anchor himself otherwise he would have lost

his mind in the rapture. Thinking back, Bucky knows why, but he was oblivious to the depth of Gale's feelings back then. He just let the intensity wash over him and didn't give it a second thought. Gale must have been like that every time he had sex, he thought. But knowing the truth makes the memory more precious now. He wonders how much it meant for Gale, to get to do that after years waiting in vain.

It's not a surprise that they didn't need too long to reach the peak. Taking it hurt because they didn't know how to prepare well enough to make it better, but Bucky always liked a little pain with his pleasure, and it made the bliss of it that much sweeter, the thought that Gale was inside him, drawing joy from him, all the headier. Gale pushed his face against Bucky's neck and made small, needy sounds as their desire spread deeper through their bodies, and his pulse beat wildly against Bucky's palm when Bucky touched his neck and drew him into a kiss that lasted until they both came down from their high.

In the afterglow, Gale kept stroking Bucky's torso and smiled against his skin, then looked up at his flushed face as though something in his world had irrevocably changed.

That's why Bucky asked, as he searched Gale's eyes, "Do you think it will feel different now? Dreaming?"

Gale took a deep breath. "No."

"I feel different."

At his words, Gale's smile widened. He caressed Bucky's face and leaned in close to kiss his cheek, murmuring. "Was it good for you?"

Bucky laughed quietly, out of joy. "Amazing." He pulled Gale into a proper kiss, then nipped his bottom lip. "I'll dream us a dance hall tonight and take you dancing."

"Ah, don't make me dance, John."

"I'll teach you."

He made good on his promise once they fell asleep. With some extra concentration, he managed to take them to a dance hall in his own dream, filled with people from a memory, the sound of cheerful music loud between its walls. Gale appeared standing by a table, shaking his head when Bucky approached him with his arms outstretched in invitation.

Bucky took his hands and tugged. “Come on, we can do anything here. Let’s dance.”

He pulled, but Gale didn’t budge. “Come on, Buck, get a move on.”

Gale laughed with a hint of confusion in his voice. “I can’t!”

“What do you mean you can’t?”

“I can’t move.”

They tried, but Gale’s feet could only shuffle in place, as if he was held down by invisible ropes. No matter how they tried, he couldn’t move. They laughed and struggled until they suddenly woke up and realized that the invisible force was, in fact, Bucky’s entire weight draped over Gale’s body, his legs holding Gale’s trapped and his torso pinning Gale’s forearm to the bed.

“Get off, you lardass.” Gale pushed him away, rubbing and shaking the pins and needles out of his arm. “Ow. Jesus.”

Bucky laughed.

The memory of the joy Bucky felt that night is still bright enough to break through the oppressive monotony of the day, but only just - and as the boys walk out and leave him alone in the library, he feels his good mood fade. Will he ever experience happiness like that again? Or will it always be tainted now with the marks of this pitiful existence? Was there anything left to look forward to in life? Bucky tries to imagine him and Gale dancing again, or flying, or being excited about a new movie, but all his fantasies leave a bland taste in his mouth. He doesn’t think he can find it in himself to care anymore. Everything is grey and pointless.

The realization just plunges him into even deeper gloom. Instead of holding a spark of hope in his chest, he leaves the library devoid of all. When Gale smiles at him in the yard, his smile in return doesn’t reach his eyes.

If there ever was a useless way to waste life, it's by sitting in the stalag. As May trudges on towards June, Bucky thinks about his night talking to Paulina in that bar in London often. Just before he learnt that Gale went down. They drank together until the first dark hours of dawn, sharing their losses and their thoughts about the war before they parted, never to see each other again. Her husband wasn't her soulmate, yet she mourned him with the same fierce, angry vengeance Bucky felt when he thought he lost Gale. She said he was either a prisoner of war or rotting in a potato field. Now that he knows the alternative, Bucky would gladly go for the potato field. That way, at least, his body would provide nutrients for vegetation to grow - he would dissolve but nature could build new life on his particles and carry his existence into thousands of others.

But this, the putrid waste of resources as hundreds of men just sit and stare, sit and stare, go mechanically through days that are all the same - this is a slow, meaningless death. He cannot take it.

He can't, he can't, he can't.

The pressure steals his breath sometimes and he has to go on walks to shake at least some of the tingling nerves from his legs. Like a wild animal circling in a cramped cage, waiting for the inevitable slaughter. It would be a mercy kill at this point. Some days, he stays out and pretends that the yard is a baseball diamond. He recalls games he listened to on the radio and the one he convinced Gale to watch with him back in '42. He tries to remember the tone of the commentator and the innings played, and he reenacts them to himself to make the memory more immersive. Walking around yelling or muttering to himself while the barren brown ground transforms into a green field in his mind is oddly freeing. It's better than reading the same books over and over again and breathing in the stale air shared with sickly friends and a soulmate he cannot help. He's so utterly useless. Even more so than he was as an Air Exec. His only function now is to stand in the line queuing towards the gates of hell one step in front of Gale, hoping that being one position further back will make a difference and save Gale from a gruesome end. Bucky doesn't really give a fuck about anything else anymore.

He's out in the yard again, playing one of his games, this time a made-up one just to keep himself guessing about the outcome, when Gale walks over from the barrack, across the empty yard.

“Hey, Bucky.” He calls out as he approaches. He looks gaunt. He’s been losing weight faster than Bucky has, but when Bucky offered him his own remaining Red Cross supplies, he refused to take it.

Bucky smiles to himself at the thought, just to do something with the emotions in his chest. He can’t even give them a name anymore. “Big game going on here, Buck.”

Gale seems uncomfortable, as though he’s wary of talking to Bucky now. That’s how things are these days. Even his own soulmate wants to keep Bucky’s sinking, dark hole of a soul at arm’s length. “Me and the guys were, uh, wondering what the score is.”

When Gale’s eyes finally land on him with fake nonchalance, Bucky laughs like he’s in on a joke Gale isn’t. He knows it doesn’t sound reassuring. He doesn’t intend it to. It makes Gale even more tense, and a vicious voice in Bucky delights in it. *Take it,* it hisses, *do whatever you want. See if you can bear it.* He watches in dark amusement as Gale looks around like one would while trying to avoid being associated with someone off their rocker in public.

“You okay, Major?” Gale asks softly.

The love in his voice grates on Bucky’s nerves. He should look at Bucky at least, if he wants to talk all sweet like that. If he wants to make Bucky believe that there’s something brighter waiting on the ‘morrow, he should make it fucking convincing. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“Just asking.”

“You’re just asking?” Bucky keeps smiling, his grin more of a grimace than an expression of mirth. “Well, I’m great, is the truth.”

He spreads his arms, gesturing at the bare land around him. “I’ve been here for eight months now. Still trapped, still cold, still eating scraps. And we keep waiting for something to happen, even though it doesn’t.”

“It could be worse.” Gale tries. “We could be dead.”

“Well, maybe for you.” Bucky huffs, circling around Gale because he can’t bear standing in one place for more than a minute. He wants to break into a run, have a go at the barbed wire, see how far he can make it before they shoot him down. It would be fun to make a bet on that, wouldn’t it? It would shake up the boys good, give them

something different to mark the day by. “At least *that* I could stand.”

He steps close to Gale, and something in him cracks for a moment. He wants to lean on him. To bury his face in his neck and close his eyes, pretend they are in England with a whole life laid out ahead of them, love purring under their palms. “I can’t stand this.”

The muscles tighten in Gale’s jaw. He looks back and forth between Bucky and the yard as though he can’t keep his eyes on Bucky without losing his composure.

“What are we waiting for? Huh?” Bucky asks. “We all think something’s gonna happen. Maybe we need to make it happen.”

“Like those Brits did?” Gale whispers, the memory of those fifty escaped then recaptured prisoners still fresh in their minds. “Go and get executed?” He gives Bucky a firm look. “We have to be patient.”

Bucky scoffs. He turns towards the empty space between the barracks, just watching it for a bit, letting the weight of a freedom lost pull him down again. “What’s your plan after this?”

“After the game?” Gale asks with a wan smile, referring to Bucky’s imaginary baseball. Perhaps hoping that if he’s playful enough, they can reconcile the chasm gaping wider and wider between them.

“After the war.”

Gale gives him a long look. “We’ll have to live through it first. Stay put. Bide our time.”

“Time, time, what time?” Bucky huffs. They’re running out of it. He’s going to be twenty-nine this year, but he doesn’t think he’ll see thirty if this goes on for much longer. He throws a nonexistent ball into nothing, then swivels back to smile at Gale. “If we both make it back home, I'll introduce you to my mom.”

The remaining colour drains from Gale’s face. No doubt, he’s thinking of holding Bucky at Thorpe Abbots, stroking his hair as Bucky told him his mom had died and he had already missed the funeral because the letter hadn’t come through soon enough. “John…”

“She'd like you.” Bucky nods to himself, well-aware that he’s talking about someone who’s beyond physical reach now. But, in this moment, his beliefs in spirituality feel suddenly sharpened. He imagines taking Gale to her grave. Saying all the things he should

have said years before, while he still had the chance. *He's amazing, Mama,* he would have said if he had gathered the guts to tell her while she was still alive, *he's so smart and brave. Don't be disappointed, please.*

Gale puts a hand on his shoulder, feather-light. "Come back inside with me, okay?"

Bucky shrugs him off. "No can do, darlin'. Gotta finish the game, you know."

Gale's eyes flash. "Enough." He snaps. "That's enough of this."

"You gonna tell me what I can or cannot do now?"

"I'm telling you, enough is enough." Gale scowls at him fiercely, hands on his hips. Bucky wonders if he could get him to deliver a punch or not. "Get your shit together. We said we'd lead the boys through it. So, lead."

Bucky sighs, deflating at the reminder of his promise. He kicks at a rock on the ground. "I wish I was still useful to you."

"I don't need you to be useful." Gale raises both of his hands in a helpless gesture, his voice climbing higher but he keeps it quiet enough for the guards in the watchtowers not to hear. "I need you to be you."

Bucky bursts into a laugh, hysterical. "Well, I'm not me. I'll never be me again, that's the thing. The old me is gone." He gives Gale a bitter look. "You lost him."

It sounds like an accusation, even if it isn't meant to be. They both flinch when they hear it, but the words are out there, echoing in that bottomless chasm. *You* lost him. *Your fault. Your burden.* Bucky didn't mean it like that at all but he feels it resonate through the plucked strings of his heart. He knows how it sounds in Gale's mind.

Gale's eyelashes flutter in rapid blinks before he squares his jaw and shoots Bucky a furious scowl. "I may have already lost him." He says. "But it feels like I'm losing my best friend now."

When Bucky's gaze snaps to his at this, Gale's eyes water. He doesn't let it spill though. He forces it back down, the tidal wave of hurt splashing through the ocean of his eyes, and he collects himself as if nothing happened. He takes a breath, shoots Bucky one more look, then heads back to the barrack. Bucky stares at his back until he

disappears inside.

A few days later, Bucky earns himself that punch. He provokes Gale. Embarrasses him. Hurts him. None of it is deserved, but he still can't stop himself from doing it because the only way he can expel the tension in his mind is by lashing out. He wrestles with Gale in the dirt like a nasty child and gets a nice, purple shiner for it. It sits on his cheekbone like a brand, and it's shameful but he wears it with pride, because his twisted mind imagines it marks him as Gale's.

They don't talk about it. If it continues to sting Gale inside like it pains Bucky, he doesn't show it. He carries on as if everything's all right. But he doesn't reach for Bucky at night. Bucky knows he should, but he doesn't apologize. He wants the pain, he realizes - it keeps him feeling alive.

It's a few days after their argument, after the landing that might finally change the course of the war, when Gale receives a letter.

It's from Marge. Perfumed, as though they were still sweethearts and Gale wasn't doomed to be in love with someone who's wasting away under a pile of corpses he seems to have only escaped in body and not soul. The letter makes Gale happier than anything in the past few months. He smiles at it and holds it to his nose, and Bucky is jealous, so jealous that he wants to tear that paper into tiny little pieces and set it on fire.

That night, Gale doesn't turn in right away. He sits in the chair next to Bucky's bunk, and they stare at each other until the terrible tension between them is gradually torn down by utter exhaustion.

"John." Gale says at last.

"Hm?"

"In the last letter I sent to Marge, I told her I had found my soulmate."

Bucky's mind drifts back to an argument in a cinema on a cold winter day, and the pitcher holding his emotions in his chest cracks. He wishes Gale told him in private. He wishes that was an option at all. "Yeah?"

Gale's sad smile looks like he understands. "She said she'd suspected all along."

Bucky smiles back for a fleeting second. She has always been too smart for her own good. He lets the silence gape between them for a moment before he speaks again. “I'm sorry for the fight.”

Gale looks out the window and nods. “She's moving back to Wyoming. I was thinking, maybe, I’d visit her if I made it back to the States.”

“You *will* make it back.”

Gale looks at him again, a thousand words in his eyes but none that he can say out loud while anyone could be listening. “I didn't mean to hit you.”

“I asked for it.” Bucky mumbles.

“Are we good?”

The sigh Bucky heaves is more fatigue than relief. “We're good.”

Near the end of summer, new prisoners join their barrack. Tuskegee men, fighter pilots. Standing strong and proud despite their wounds and the way some of the other soldiers look at them with contempt. Bucky envies them for that strength. The outside world is not yet a bygone shadow to them, they still had it only a few weeks ago. They're still confident in themselves and their future in ways that Bucky hasn't been in a very long time. Probably even before he went to London for that last two-day pass.

The new boys are a good addition to their group. They're smart and positive, and they’re willing to do whatever it takes to help their efforts to escape. Gale is the first to befriend them, which surprises Bucky - he doesn’t tend to be the first to reach out, to make a connection. But, if he thinks about it, who else would have done it? Bucky is in no shape to play nice or to put on the charms for anyone. He barely remembers what those charms felt like and how much Gale liked it when he smiled.

Perhaps, it’s because Gale needs support just as desperately as they all do and Bucky can’t provide enough of it. Either way, he gets close to the new boys, especially Jefferson. Or, as Gale calls him, Alex. And as

much as Bucky hates watching them spend time together without including him, he can see how Gale's face lights up after every conversation they have. He can't let his bitterness ruin that.

So, he never says a word even as autumn fades into winter again and the chill starts to creep back into their beds. He stays quiet when Gale climbs into his bunk to share for the first time in half a year, and doesn't interrupt when the first thing Gale does once he's settled under the blankets is talk about Alex. Bucky takes it in silence, but a beast squirms inside his chest, furious at himself and the world, trashing to get out. Always, incessantly, it chants, *out, out, out!* with the pumping blood in his veins.

It turns out that Alex isn't only smart, handsome and funny, but he can draw too. Pin-ups and maps, with perfect lines and curves and to-scale distances where it matters. He's recruited to draw routes for their potential escape plans, and some of the guys pay him in their best smokes to draw them their kriegie fantasies, as lewd as they dare ask for. Others ask him to put the girl of their dreams on paper, a soulmate they haven't met yet or one that they have no picture of. Bucky doesn't care about this little business at all. It's not like he needs a drawing when his world is right there in front of him, even if he's fading. Alex's skills don't interest him in the slightest - not until he overhears Gale asking for something of his own.

Alex and Gale are in the library again, as usual, pretending to read but going over Alex's maps under the cover of his book. Bucky is just about to walk in when he hears Gale's voice through the door, muffled but some of the words still loud enough to hear.

"Can you… example… landscapes?"

Bucky frowns. His curiosity keeps him from moving even though he knows he should. Alex's reply is loud and clear in his delight. "Of course I can. Would be a nice break from all the kriegie wet dreams. What kind of landscape?"

Gale is too quiet to hear, but something he says makes Alex laugh. "Laundry? That's very specific." There's a pause, then he continues, a bit too gently to Bucky's liking. "Are you missing home?"

"Something like that." Gale says wistfully.

Bucky steps away from the door. Did he really do what he thinks he did? Is he trying to get a drawing of their dreamscape? *Theirs?* Alex has no right to that space, it's not his to know or to put his fingers on

its reflection, to shape its lines and the bend of the river. Something that private shouldn't be shared even if it was originally Gale's memory. They filled it with their dreams for over ten years - if it's gone forever now, it shouldn't be resurrected by a stranger's hand.

A gripping fear seizes his throat.

It's ridiculous. The dream is lost already, so why does it matter if Alex learns about it too? It's not like he can invade or take something away that doesn't exist anymore. It's not a betrayal if Gale wants to remember it better. Still, Bucky feels lost. He needs to gather his thoughts, but he doesn't get the chance. Chairs scrape in the library and the door opens.

"Bucky." Gale frowns at him when their eyes meet. He still looks happy but there's worry seeping into his expression now as he takes in Bucky's face. "You okay?"

Bucky nods. He knows he has developed some ticks recently that show how much his nerves are fraying at the edges, but he's determined to keep it together now. "You two had a good talk?"

Something must still show in his behaviour, because Gale reaches out and grips his elbow. He gives Alex a smile. "Go ahead, we'll catch up."

Alex looks between them uncertainly, his book and notebook tucked under his arm, but he doesn't protest. "Yes, sir."

They watch him go. As soon as he's out of sight, Bucky is moving forward. He wraps his arms around Gale to hold him tight and drops his forehead to Gale's shoulder, shaking his head. "Why did you do that?"

"I didn't do anything."

Bucky jerks back and pushes him away. He starts pacing in a tight circle. "I don't want him to know *anything* about the house."

Gale grabs both of his wrists and squeezes them hard. "Calm down."

"It's not *his -"*

"I know." Gale hisses. He moves his hold from Bucky's wrists to his lapels, shaking him just once. "But don't you think it could help? I told you how I build dreams."

“Building it is not the problem.” Bucky growls back, but he falters when Gale's grip on him loosens and Gale’s gaze slides to the floor. “Buck?”

Gale's fists flatten on Bucky’s chest, then curl again. “Something goes wrong every time I try to go back there.”

Bucky gets a sinking feeling in his stomach. “You didn't tell me.”

Gale closes his eyes. His eyebrows dig deep lines into his face and his plump lips thin as he presses them together. “It’s the least of our worries.”

But Bucky can read upside down - when Gale looks up again, he can see it in his eyes. “That’s what triggers the mesca-dreams, isn’t it? It had nothing to do with the guards or the chow.”

“That guard did look familiar.” Gale sighs. He rubs at his forehead with one hand, but leaves the other clinging to Bucky's coat. “I can’t maintain the dream without seeing those goddamn funnels. I think my memory of… those days is more vivid than my childhood ones.”

Bucky forces himself to breathe out. His possessive emotions drain out of him. They aren't important. It’s unlikely that he makes it much longer anyway. The only thing that matters is that Gale does.

He brushes his knuckles against Gale's cheek. “How many smokes did he ask for? I'll scrounge it up for you.”

Gale hugs him.

There are as many ways to build dreams as there are people who dream, but some books Gale read attempted to group them into categories. He explained it to Bucky once, on a beach in England, a few weeks after Algeria. They got a pass from brass to fly down to Bournemouth for a few days of recovery from one of their most gruelling, bloodiest missions. With a bunch of the boys, he and Gale made the trip, and spent most of their day on the sandy beach, soaking up the summer sunshine and chasing each other into the cold waves.

By the time the sunset descended on the sky with its rose-tinted hue, they were all exhausted and settled down in small groups by the beach huts, watching the flames of sunshine dance on the waves. Gale sat in his skivvies in the sand, legs crossed at the ankles. He was still waiting for his trousers to dry after Bucky got them soaking wet, and Bucky was stretched out on his back next to him, staring up at the sky. Small white clouds drifted across his view, their bellies sun-kissed pink like Gale's cheeks. He wanted to sit up and press his lips to that sunburn to feel its sweet heat, but too many eyes watched, he couldn't risk it.

Gale pushed his sunglasses into his blond hair and gave Bucky a playful look. "Do you like this place?"

Bucky let out a happy sigh. He crossed his arms under his head and closed his eyes. "What do you think, Buck?"

There was a pause, but he let it go on. He could feel Gale's eyes on his body and basked in it.

"Do you want me to bring us back here tonight?" Gale asked.

Bucky let his lips curl into a smirk. "What for?"

Gale hummed. "I reckon you wouldn't just lie there like a log if we had no audience."

Bucky sat up, righting his own sunglasses and looking Gale's freckled face over from behind them. He grinned. "You know me, doll."

Gale flicked sand on Bucky's leg, but didn't say anything else. He closed his eyes and tilted his face towards the sun, then took deep breaths of the salty air. His fingers sank into the sand on either side of him, pushing through the soft, warm layers into the colder ones underneath. He grabbed a fistful, raised his hand, then started pouring it on his own shin. He looked up to watch it seep through the gaps between his fingers, as if the glittering particles in it mesmerized him.

"What are you doing?" Bucky asked, bemused.

"This is how I build dreams." Gale said absent-mindedly, now pushing his feet under the heaps in front of him. "I'm a reminiscer."

Bucky took off his sunglasses to put one temple between his lips, playing with it. "What?"

“A few years back, I read this book about dreambuilding styles.” Gale explained, brushing the grains off his leg. “Educers dream about things they anticipate.”

“Like precognition?”

Gale snorted, ever the skeptic. “Hm. If you believe in prophets.”

Bucky chuckled, knocking their feet together.

Gale went on. “Collectors put pieces of several different memories and feelings into one dream. Reminiscers use one detailed memory. And daydreamers drift from one reverie to another. They follow their emotions.”

When Bucky tilted his head at him, the corners of his lips tugged up into a lopsided smile. “That’s why you can’t stick to a single dreamscape.”

“Oh, you’re so full of it.”

“I'm not.” Gale laughed. When he looked at Bucky again, fondness shone in his eyes. “You could do it, you know, if you held onto one emotion.”

“If you had told me sooner, I could have practiced.”

Gale tipped his head back to look up at the sky, then gave Bucky a side glance. “I like having you in my head.”

“You just want to hog the left seat, don't you.”

Gale laughed and stood up. “Well, you could always read up on it yourself.”

Bucky put his sunglasses back on and stared up at Gale with his best grin. “Why would I do that when I have you?”

He earned himself an exasperated shake of the head. “You need emotional connection to build a dream good enough to share. I need to remember the sensory details.” Gale said. “So I'm going to check that water again.”

“Suit yourself.” Bucky smiled and watched him walk off towards the waves. He had a plan. He would lull Gale into a sense of safety, then tackle him into the sea. That should do as a sensory detail.

Alex's drawing doesn't help, but it's as good a Christmas present as they can get this year. He and Gale sit side by side in the hallway between the rooms of the barrack and look at it together until Gale drops his head back against the wall and pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes closed to keep himself from crumbling. The picture is nothing like their dream in its details - the shape of the trees or the angle of the mountain - but at the same time, it evokes the same atmosphere as their dreamscape. All of its serenity, its wild freedom and the longing Bucky feels for it. Bucky traces its smudged pencil lines, then looks up at Gale's sad face and wonders.

If they managed to open those doors again, would he be able to dream this for Gale?

He wishes he knew the answer.

But the last days of the year go by in cold and despair, their only hope the news that trickle in through the radio Gale eventually put together. The Russians are close, getting closer by the day, and they all hold each other tight hoping it's going to come to an end soon.

It does.

But not in the way they wished for. On one of the first nights of the new year, one of their men bursts into the barrack and tells them they're marching. Thirty minutes is all they got. Thirty minutes to pack whatever they can carry, to prepare for a walk God knows how long through a blizzard that rages ruthlessly over the land. Bucky gathers his belongings, puts on all the warm clothes he has, and slips the drawing inside his breast pocket. Before they leave the room for the last time, he squeezes Gale's hand.

It feels like a march to death.

Ice stings their skin where their patchwork clothes leave them bare. The wind whistles through their lines as though death cackled on its wake, calling for them all to fall over, let it end, let a bullet draw the curtains and the snow cover their bodies. Under the pressure of their feet, the frozen dirt road turns to mud that cakes solid again after a few seconds stuck to their boots. Every step means added weight, and

their legs ache from the effort and the cold that bites into their very bones.

They're not allowed to drag each other along. Whoever falls and doesn't get up is left behind or shot, and the line grows thinner with every mile walked. It doesn't take long before coherence deserts Bucky and leaves his thoughts unhindered to flit between wild emotions and numb reality. He squints at Gale through eyes half-closed against the cruel wind. He sees the struggle in his gait, the way he drags his right leg as though he can barely lift it. His scarf is wrapped around his face up to his cheekbones. His exhales have nowhere to go but up, but the sudden drop in temperature freezes the moisture there - it leaves frost clumped around his eyelashes. Long, white lines, moving down and up when he blinks. Snow covers his hair.

Bucky watches him, and imagines what he would look like as a corpse. Peace on his face, snow in his hair, frost lining the last warm spots of his body.

He wants to tell Gale something but he doesn't know what and he doesn't have the strength for it. He just brushes against his shoulder, relieved when Gale bumps against him in turn.

How long can you walk for love? He wonders, then looks at Gale again, and his fear sharpens into thousands of icy needles stuck into his chest. *How long will love walk for you?*

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the delay, I've been very busy unfortunately. I'm grateful for all your comments, I hope you like this chapter too ❤

Warning for referenced period-typical racism and homophobia.

Trapped in the stalag's miserable barracks, it didn't take them long to learn all the different flavours of cold. The cheek-stinging bite in the air was sweet compared to the bitter chill that crept through their clothes, under their skin, to the marrow of their bones. Then there was the cold of the chow, as it slid in nauseating trickles down their throats, forced past their mouths only by the ache of their hunger. The cold of death, stale, drifting whispers through the camp as the men slowly withered away.

Bucky thought he knew every shade of it by the time they were leaving the camp. He felt more familiar with it than the seasons of the year or Gale's dreams of Wyoming, and yet, life could still show him a new level of torment, as if it had just invented it to knock him down from the cocky belief that things couldn't get any worse. The cold of their endless march was staggering, all-consuming and, after a point, nothing but numbness down to the struggling muscles of his heart.

It seems impossible to recover from that kind of damage. Even now, after hours of huddling together with the boys in the relative warmth of some wretched brick factory, he still doesn't feel anything but pain and cold.

A few hours ago, Gale came to tell him that they're getting on a train at first light. His nose was red, and he was sniffling from the cold with that wet noise Bucky hates so much, but as long as it was the sound of him breathing, it was the best sound in the universe. Bucky hooked a hand around Gale's elbow and pulled him down to the spot he reserved on his left side just for him. Always on his left. No one else was allowed to take that place. Gale laughed at him softly, tapping into some reserves of joy Bucky had no idea how he kept from the voracious darkness all around. He let Bucky pull him close, then he scooted ever closer, laying his head on Bucky's shoulder.

He's fast asleep now. Away from all this pain, at least for a moment, at least until the sun peeks above the horizon. Bucky wonders if he's dreaming. Perhaps it's better if he isn't. Carefully, he shifts until Gale's head is on his chest, his arm limp around Bucky's middle. Does Gale hear his heartbeat, through fabric thawing damp and the crinkling replica of their dreamscape? Does it take him back to happier times? To a soft bed in Bournemouth or the tickling summer grass of Thorpe Abbotts? He hopes it does.

Bucky himself is beyond sleep. It can't touch him. Can't knock him unconscious. His eyelids are so heavy that they're stuck open and refuse to close, his body so exhausted that rest does nothing for it anymore, his fear of that train too deep to let his pulse slow. So he sits and stares into nothing, just a guard over Gale's dreams. On his other side, Brady clings to his elbow even in his sleep. Around them, the rest of the boys are bundles of rags and bones holding onto each other. They're at the end of the line - it doesn't matter if all their weaknesses are bared for everyone to see.

It's with that thought in mind that Bucky lets himself turn his face until Gale's hair tickles his skin. Gale smells like winter and decay, nothing pleasant, and he must hate it, oh, how it must chip away at him that he can't clean himself, but Bucky doesn't care about the smell. Underneath it all, he can still find traces of his Gale, the Gale before all this, and he holds onto that. Maybe it's only an illusion, but he has always been a believer, hasn't he? His lips are so close to Gale's forehead that he feels the warmth of his exhales trapped between them. Just a small tilt of his chin and he could close the gap. Kiss him one last time before they're loaded into that train whose destination can only be hell.

Opposite him, someone coughs. Bucky's eyes snap to the source of the sound and find Alex staring at him with an unreadable look in his eyes. There's not enough light to see his expression properly. For a second, Bucky thinks he misjudged the situation and gave too much away, but then, Alex leans forward just enough that a strip of dim moonlight traces the silhouettes of his features. He glances between Bucky and Gale, then gives Bucky a compassionate look. He nods. Bucky purses his lips and nods back. Even at the end of the world, some things shouldn't be done where others could be watching. He's grateful to Alex for being a good friend and reminding him of that fact.

Reluctantly, he moves to lean more towards Brady than Gale and tries to sleep.

The train feels just as dark as the one that took him to the stalag after he had been captured. Its memory fills him with dread. The cries of that tortured soldier echo in his ears, and he can't stop watching Gale, scared that he's going to crack the same way. If he ever heard Gale sob like that, he'd lose the remaining bits of his sanity. He'd throw himself at the walls of this moving cage and he'd attack the first guard he saw with his nails and teeth like some rabid animal desperate to be put down.

But the darkness and the dizzying rocking in the cramped space don't break Gale. Instead, an odd peace settles on his features. Acceptance. Bucky feels it seep into him too, his soul still attuned to Gale's. He never knew peace before the war. He was always so restless, searching for thrill, for adventure, a purpose, running towards something. Then Gale came, and he had everything he ever needed, but the war swirled around them and never let up. Bucky has never felt peace, if he thinks about it. Until now. It's as if everything has come to a standstill in this dark, hopeless moment, and there's only the two of them, sharing it. Stationary while the world shifts around them. They watch each other mutely.

"Remember Nebraska?" Gale breaks the silence after a while, a sad smile on his face.

Bucky mirrors it. He thinks of the taste of toothpaste on soft lips, of Gale's thighs squeezing his hips, of nervous first dates and laughter muffled in his neck. The warmth of Gale's hand when he threaded their fingers together. "I do."

Gale blinks at him as though he's letting something precious go. "Would've been two years in a few weeks."

The words stab Bucky like a rusty nail in the heart. Would have been, not will be. As if it was over already. They spent almost one and a half years out of those two locked up. They never had a chance to celebrate an anniversary. Gale mentioned it last spring too, as if he thought Bucky would be able to appreciate the day more, as if it could have brought him joy, but it didn't really work out that way. This time, though, his tone is different. It's defeated, yet there's a weightlessness to his acceptance of it, and Bucky sniffs from the pain it causes him. He tries to put some of his old playfulness in his tone when he replies.

“Still keeping count?”

Gale gives him another small smile, then his gaze drifts away to focus on nothing. Around them, the boys are half-dead on their feet, just waiting. Some praying, others dazed, a few panicking. Solly is on the verge of losing it. Scanning the strip of the landscape he can see through the slots in the wagon's wall, he keeps mumbling about how the Krauts are going to kill them, and each time his voice rises, Gale’s deep rumble cuts him off, trying to calm him.

After one of these incidents, Bucky can’t help but sigh and look at Gale again. “Hasn't gone exactly how we thought, has it?”

Gale lets out a heavy exhale too. “Not exactly.” His tone is gentle and calm as though he was murmuring all this into Bucky's ear as they lay in bed, sharing a pillow. “You wish you'd done it differently?”

There’s a ray of light that slips into the wagon and swings over Gale’s face when the movement of the train rocks him forward. The blue of his tattered scarf brings out the shade of his eyes, and Bucky still feels his heart flutter at the sight. He wants to reach out, but he doesn’t know if he’d be able to stop himself from giving it all away, so he doesn’t. If he could go back and do something differently, he’d love Gale the way he needs to be loved sooner. But that's neither here nor there, because the way Gale looks up at him now seems to be asking if he would've rather not fallen in love at all, knowing this pain, and Bucky can only answer that with one thing.

“Can’t say I would've.” He says. “You?”

Regret flickers in Gale's eyes. “I wasn't planning on getting shot down.”

They fall silent for a moment as they contemplate how things would have gone if he hadn't gone down in Bremen. Would they be back in the States now, training new meat for the slaughter? Or would they have stayed and hoped the next mission would make all the difference to end the war? Would Gale have broken their bond if it had been Bucky who went down first and not him?

“You know,” Gale continues. “I really did believe that if there was only two B-17s left, it'd be you and me flying.”

When Bucky locks eyes with him, it’s not guilt he sees, nor is it grief or disappointment. It’s something rawer. A glimpse of Gale's well-hidden core, his nook in the attic, exposed to the open because this is

the only way he can share it with Bucky now. By voicing what's in there out loud. His Gale, who has only ever believed in one shooting star, no God, no fate, no good luck charms, is trying to tell him that he had faith in the two of them all along. That he bet and called an all-in, and he'll continue hoping it's enough to win the game until the very last card is revealed.

“These two years would have been a lot rougher without you, John.” Gale tells him quietly. It’s the *I love you* he never says.

Bucky nods. His heart feels heavy. “Same.”

They both thought the train would take them to their end, but it doesn't. They march through Nürnberg, through streets bombed to smithereens, and end up in another stalag where they stop at last for a few days. It’s overcrowded and so sparsely equipped that it's not much better than just dropping into the snow out in the open. A few tents have fires going using whatever material they can burn, and Gale’s old-new friend, George, gets them a place in one of them. They stand around the sweet, hot flames and make small talk about baseball and Wyoming as though it was just an evening at the pub. Thankfully, George never questions why Bucky knows so much about the state even though he never stepped foot in it. He’s a pleasant fella, similar to Bucky - the *old* Bucky - in a lot of ways, and it makes Bucky wonder if Gale had ever been sweet on him before he left home.

It shouldn't matter. But George is still attractive in all the ways Bucky now isn’t. A comparison Bucky can’t help making. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

It's a strange feeling that Gale is the one making connections now. It used to be Bucky who had friends everywhere and could buddy up with anyone, anytime, but he’s only a frozen husk of himself here, just a shell. He wonders, if they survive, will the change be permanent or will he bounce back from it? How long until Gale grows tired of keeping him around like some keepsake from better times? How long until someone like George seizes his chance?

Maybe, it’s just Bucky's exhaustion talking.

Because, at the same time, he can see how Gale changed too. How much he hardened over the years. He wonders if it's their broken bond that drives him to reach out to people now, and whether it's that bond

that makes him so hesitant to agree to an escape plan, even though they've been plotting with the boys for what feels like forever. Perhaps, Gale is wary of making big decisions now because the last one he made affected them so terribly. In some ways, he is more withdrawn than ever, determined not to let any of his weaknesses show because he thinks he's responsible to keep the rest of them going, and this is the change Bucky hates the most. He throws himself at Gale's walls time and again, but Gale pushes him off.

That first evening in the new camp, he stands by the mouth of their tent and watches the grim evening descend on the land with grey skies and a chill that paints their exhales into mist. Gale is making his way back from another tent where he went to check on the boys, and Bucky's eyes follow him with wry amusement as he skirts around muddy puddles that most other soldiers stomp through with indifference.

When Gale notices him, he alters the course of his steps like a bug drawn to the light, unaware or uncaring that it's going to burn him to death. He stops close to Bucky, looking at him mournfully.

Bucky holds his gaze, then musters a lopsided smile. "Got all the boys situated?"

Gale nods and hums, turning to frown morosely at the empty path he has just crossed between the tents. There's no one else around them, everyone is huddled as close to the dry patches of ground inside as they can. When Gale leans close enough that his elbow brushes Bucky's, Bucky puts his arm around Gale's shoulders and gives him a friendly shake before dropping his touch again. The most he can do here, with no privacy. He takes out a cigarette and puts it between his lips.

"You okay, doll?" He asks under his breath as he lights it.

Gale sniffs. He rubs his boot against the wooden post keeping the tent up, trying to scrape the mud off the sides. "Could be better."

I'm not okay, John, is what Bucky hears. He looks up at Gale's face again as the smoke fills him with warm relief, and tries to guess what it is this time. The cold? The dirt? People dying? The unknown, stretching, long and vicious, over their future? "It's gonna get better. Soon as we're out of this hellhole." When Gale doesn't say anything to that, he adds, "We just gotta make our move, Buck."

"I know." Gale says quietly, gaze still fixed on his muddy boots.

“Far as I see, we've got nothing to lose.” Another drag of smoke. “Not anymore.”

Gale just hums again. They stand there side by side in silence until the last of Bucky's cigarette burns down. When there's nothing left of it to smoke, he flicks the stump into a puddle and watches the brown water swallow it whole.

The night after Gale's first mission to Bremen, Bucky had passed out at a table in the pub before he and the rest of the boys were kicked out, left to continue drinking back at the base. It wasn't a long stretch of sleep, but deep enough to dream. There, ungracefully drooling on the wooden table, he relived the day in a nightmare where Gale didn’t come back.

He stood in the tower, anxiously waiting for him, but as the line of forts appeared, someone told him that Gale's wasn't among them. His mind rebelled against the dream, knowing the truth, but he couldn't remember he was dreaming. It felt real. The fear, the pain. He snapped at the dream figures around him, *it can’t be true, I know it isn’t, it was only his first mission!*

“They were just unwritten letters anyway.” One of the men beside him said and pointed to the sky, where all the B-17s turned into paper planes in front of Bucky’s eyes. Silver metal to white pages, cursive condolences curling on their wings, their names now only *great sorrow* and *nobly given,* wrinkles in their sharp paper noses. As Bucky watched, the first caught on fire, and the flames ate the letter-fort, then licked at the next one hungrily until they were all just ashes and smoke in the clouds.

Bucky stared at the sight in horror, unable to comprehend or protest the impossible, because it all seemed like the greatest truth bared to him in that moment, and a part of him began to believe that he really did lose Gale that day. But then, he spotted a box of toothpicks on the railing, and something in his mind cleared. A hint of lucidity returned. He reached for the box, and when he grabbed it, he felt a tug, and the scorched scenes of his nightmare faded away.

When the world sharpened again, he found himself at a high school

dance in an unfamiliar hall, decorated with gaudy handmade boas and ribbon monstrosities. Bucky's upper lip curled in distaste. God, he didn't miss high school one bit. He didn't miss anything from before he met Gale. Those memories were all colourless and bland, he had no interest in revisiting them.

But that dream was Gale's.

Across from Bucky, beyond the slow dancing teenagers, Gale stood in an old brown suit, tie sitting perfectly around his lovely neck, a single white rose in his hands. His eyes were searching for someone. Confident, Bucky strode forward in his uniform and ignored the stares Gale's dream classmates gave him. But when Gale's blue eyes met his, Gale's face only darkened, and he looked away. Bucky frowned. Did he do something wrong? In his dream, he couldn't remember. He was just happy to be out of his nightmare, and in a dream where Gale conjured people from his memories, not just stretching meadows and trees waving their canopies in the breeze.

"There you are." Bucky grinned when he made it to Gale. He could see Gale's jaw clench, but he received no reply. His smile faded. "You mad at me or something?"

Gale kept staring at the crowd of students, waiting. "Did I ask you to come here?"

Bucky felt his frown dig harder into his forehead, his lips thin. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his sheepskin jacket. "I got your clue."

Gale shook his head, his face turned away. "Didn't send it."

Bucky nodded to himself, biting his lower lip. What did he do to deserve such coldness? "Well, part of you meant to send it 'cause here I am."

"Here you are." Gale said warmly, but it wasn't for Bucky - it was for the slender blonde girl who rushed up to him excitedly and smiled. Gale gave her the flower, then kissed her on the cheek. "You look beautiful, Marge."

"Thank you." She said, tilting her head flirtily as she squeezed Gale's hand. Her lips stretched into a sweet smile. "With such a dapper partner, I must."

Gale laughed.

Bucky had had enough. “I don’t like this dream.”

The way Gale snapped at him took him aback. “Not all my dreams are built for you.” His eyes shot sparks. “Get out if you want.”

“Who's your friend, Gale?” Dream-Marge asked, her cheerful eyes on Bucky. “You don’t go to our school, do you?”

“What are we doing here?” Bucky muttered to Gale.

Gale blinked up at the ceiling, then turned to Marge again. He touched her shoulder. “I'm sorry, darling, I have to go.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but Gale grabbed Bucky's hand, and the world swirled around them before she could get a word out. The floor wobbled until hardwood turned to grass, the music swelled into birdsong and the garish decorations blurred in stripes of blue and pink that smeared forlornly over the evening sky above their beloved valley. They were back in their usual dreamscape. Bucky breathed out in relief.

Gale dropped his hand and sat down right where he was, on top of the hill overlooking the log house. He plucked a long blade of grass and put it between his lips.

Bucky crouched down beside him, running his fingers through the sea of green under his feet. He felt poison dripping from his lips. “You missing Marge now, huh? A woman's touch? Did you kiss her at that dance?”

Gale didn’t rise to his taunt for a fight. He rested his elbows on his knees, and his suit became a checkered shirt, his trousers worn denim, his dress shoes boots. A cowboy's look. He sighed through his nose. “I just wanted a hug.”

“I have arms, Buck.” Bucky said, somewhat mollified. “I can use them.”

Gale didn’t reply to that. The wind ruffled his hair, rinsing the pomade out of it until it lay in soft, boyish locks over his forehead. More red bled into his sky, like blood dissolving in water and swirling down the drain. A drop of it hit Bucky's cheek, then another, and a second later, invisible clouds burst into cold and heavy rain.

“For God's sake.” Bucky swore as it drenched him. More water streamed down his face, and Gale just sat there, staring into space.

“What. What the hell is your problem?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Gale took the grass out of his mouth, twirled it between his fingers, then threw it away. He looked bitter. “You didn't say what it was like up there.”

Guilt burnt in Bucky's stomach as it finally clicked in his mind. It was all about the mission. “I told you. Didn’t know what to say.”

Gale stood up. When Bucky followed, he just shook his head, eyes fixed on the log house. He wanted to hide in there, Bucky imagined, but he forced himself to stay. The rain continued to fall in an unforgiving shower over the land. After a moment, Gale reached into his pocket and pulled out a wrinkled bill. Bucky’s lucky deuce.

“A piece of paper won't save me.” He said as he stared at it getting wet in the downpour. He folded it and pressed it to Bucky's chest. “I don’t need your trinkets.”

Bucky shoved Gale's arm away, hurt. “It brought you back to me.”

“Luck brought me back.” Gale turned to face him at last, his voice straining. Wet locks of his hair were plastered to his forehead. Rivers rolled down his cheeks, more splattered on his shoulders. He looked like an angel, harrowed by the plight of mortals. “There’s no control over that.”

“What do you even know about luck?” Bucky snapped, but he regretted it immediately when he saw Gale's face go blank.

“I knew my dad's.” He said, cool and hard as ice in a hailstorm. The bill was pressed to Bucky's chest again. “I don’t need this.”

“Well, I do.” Bucky clenched his hand tight around Gale's, trapping the paper between their fingers. “Do you think it was easy to let you go up there without me? It damn near killed me, Buck. And I'm fucking Air Exec, I had to greenlight you and wait for hours in the tower, how do you think I felt? Huh? *Hours.* What if you hadn't come back?”

He shook Gale's fist where it held the deuce to his chest. “This was all I could give you to protect you.”

It stopped raining. The pinks and blues of the sky met in one final clash before they blended into a mellow purple. Water dripped from Gale’s chin and nose, but he wiped it away with his free hand. There

was no more anger in his eyes. “I didn't think about that.”

Bucky deflated too. With his thumb, he traced the ridges of Gale's knuckles. “Humor me and keep it.”

A sigh left Gale's lips. “You sound like my dad, John. He also thought he could control his luck, and look where that got him.”

That made Bucky nauseous. “I'm nothing like that bastard.”

“Then why give me this instead of telling me what you saw?” Gale pushed against Bucky's chest again. His bones left blooming pain in the center of Bucky's chest, a mirror image of the hurt Gale must have felt. He seemed more upset about the good luck charm than anything else. “You trust your *stupid* rituals more than my skills.”

There it was - the crux of the matter. An old scar torn open again. It happened by accident, but it still must have stung, so Gale was lashing out, and it was up to Bucky to prove he wasn't like the man who left the wound in the first place.

“Don't twist it -”

“I'm not twi -”

“Yes, you are.” Bucky countered sharply. When Gale stayed silent, he continued. “You’re wrong.”

That wasn't a word Gale heard often. People never argued with him. There was no need - he was always the voice of reason, he carried himself like a leader, he was calm and smarter than them all. Except, when it came to matters of the heart, as Bucky had come to realize long before that night. In love, Gale was stubborn and quick to let his insecurities blind him. He was overcontrolling, too scared to be hurt or *to hurt* to let Bucky be an equal partner when he made decisions. But he wanted to be proven wrong so bad. He wanted Bucky to fight him and overwrite his misconceptions, he wanted to be taught that Bucky could be his safe place, and he wanted to let go the way he only could in the attic in his dreams. Bucky knew all this, but it wasn't an easy war to win.

“I trust you. You’re the best pilot in the whole damn Air Force.” He went on. He tightened his hold on Gale's hand and the bill again. “But I go crazy if I can’t be there with you and the boys. I can’t stand it. I feel useless on the ground, you know? So let me do this for you.” He lowered his voice. “‘Cause I do believe in it.”

Gale's eyes softened, and the remaining tension in his jaw dissolved. He put his free hand on Bucky's side, and his fist moved in Bucky's grip until Bucky let him straighten his fingers, the lucky deuce caught between their palms.

"I'm sorry." Gale apologized.

Bucky gave him a small smile. "Hell of a day, huh?"

"Hell of a day." Gale sighed. He stroked Bucky's waist. His other hand wriggled out of Bucky's hold to pocket the money again. "All right. I'll humor you, you loony."

Bucky nodded. "Keep it with you."

Gale gave him an exasperated look, but he put his other arm around Bucky's waist too until Bucky pulled him into a proper hug. He held Bucky tightly and pressed his face to Bucky's neck. They stood on the hill like that as the air turned summer-warm and heady with the smell of linden blossom. It was amusing how Gale's dreams shifted with his emotions even if the setting stayed the same. Bucky always tried to note the changes but sometimes he would forget the details when he woke up. Flowers always meant that Gale was happy though - because they marked the season when his father let his uncle take him to the mountains. When he felt free.

Bucky nuzzled Gale's hair and smiled. "Bet you I give better hugs than Marge."

He could feel Gale's annoyed exhale on his skin. "It's not a damn competition."

So, I'm right, Bucky thought smugly, but he kept his mouth shut and just stroked Gale's back. A moment later, he was shaken awake by the barkeep and Curt's hands in the pub.

When Gale escapes their long captivity in Germany, it's like living through that first mission to Bremen all over again, but without an end in sight. In a moment of now or never, they decide to make a run for it in the cover of the dark and the chaos all around before they're

marched past the Danube. Bill and George go first, then it's their turn. Gale looks at him, and Bucky tells him to go, that he'll be right there behind him, every ounce of hope he ever felt pounding through his veins in a prayer that at least Gale makes it. Freedom is a step away - but when he glances over his shoulder and sees the guard with the rifle pointed at his soulmate, Bucky's real purpose is bared to him like the marble of a sculpture in a church when the sunlight finds it through the stained glass.

He acts before he could think. There is no good luck charm in his pockets that could shield Gale but his body he still has, to give and to protect what he can, so he does. He jumps to intercept the guard, and he manages to push the weapon before it's shot, the bullet flying past its target. Relief clashes with adrenaline as his eyes meet Gale's once more, and he yells at him to get out of there because that's the only thing that matters. When Gale disappears in the shadows over the wall, Bucky's pain burns inside and outside, beaten and bruised into him by rifle butts, Kraut fists and the sting of being left behind, but the ocean of his relief drowns it soon. It's over. No matter what happens now, he gave it his all.

It's only when they hunker down to sleep in a rickety old building that the anxiety creeps in.

No one knows that Gale is beyond his reach now, but plenty of the fellas are aware of their bond, so they come to him for news, desperate for a beacon of hope that it's possible to make it out alive. *Wish him luck,* some say before they bid him goodnight. *Let us know how he's doing when you wake up,* others ask, not truly concerned for Gale's life but their own, looking for something to hold onto as they wait for liberation. He's going to get these questions until they assume Gale dead, Bucky realizes with dread. He won't have an update for them in the morning, nor the next, because his bond is broken, and he's nothing but an Air Exec watching the sky from the tower, hoping that Gale isn't in a paper plane burning in the clouds. No news. Nothing until the mission is over.

A week goes by without a sign. The pitying looks start after the second night, but Bucky ignores them. Let them think that the reason he hears nothing is because Gale is dead. He knows his truth. Every time he sleeps, he seeks out those locked doors and stares at them. Sometimes, it takes him a while to find them and he panics until his dream turns into a nightmare, but he always finds them eventually. At the end of a long hallway, covered by overgrown vegetation in a Wisconsin forest or up in the sky as if they were the gates of heaven, but they're there

in some form in every dream. Gale can't be dead if they're still there, can he? Sometimes, Bucky leans against those barriers and tries to find traces of Gale's soul in his own dream. He finds none. No voice or scent comes through.

Are they lost to each other forever?

Bucky is too tired to dwell on that.

In Gale's absence, he has no choice but to talk more to the boys. When they miss Gale's leadership, they turn to him, and when he misses Gale's company too deeply to bear, he turns to them. It's not perfect, but it's enough to help them carry on through boredom and misery. He plays cards with Hambone, Crank and Brady, trades crumbling smokes for jokes with Glen, Murph and DeMarco in their increasingly hostile camps, and has awkward discussions with Alex. It's as though they both have something on their chests, but neither has what it takes to step over the lines separating acquaintance from friend.

In the fading light every evening, Bucky takes out the damaged, wrinkled drawing from his breast pocket and spends a few minutes looking at it, trying to recall what their dreamscape used to make him feel. It's hard to remember any emotion that doesn't taste bitter on the tongue but he works on it doggedly, spurred on by the feverish fantasy of dreaming it for Gale one day when all this is nothing but a shadow in the past.

One day, Alex catches him off-guard by joining him while he has the drawing in his hands.

"All this time, I thought you were fixing a map with that stare." He says lightly, standing with his fists in his pockets by the tree stump Bucky uses as a chair.

Bucky grunts. He folds the paper and puts it back under his coat, where it's safe from rain and wear. The setting sun that shines on his face still radiates some warmth that he tries to soak in even as the chill walks its fingertips up his back.

"I thought I drew that one for Buck." Alex continues. He sounds curious, but Bucky isn't in the mood to entertain him.

"Well, you didn't."

"Didn't I?" Alex puts a foot on a root sticking out from the stump and presses down on it, then lets up. It looks like it might snap any second.

Bucky gives it a side glance, then looks at the barbed wire fence a few hundred yards away, his eyes dark. He huffs. “Playing dumb doesn’t suit you, Alex.”

Alex's leg increases its pressure and the wood cracks, then falls off. “Fair enough.” He puts his foot back on the ground and crouches down by Bucky's side. He grabs the broken off root and starts a mindless drawing in the dust. “Were you soulmates?”

“Are.” Bucky says, nodding to himself. He has about five more cigarettes left. He considers smoking one now. Wasting it on the pang of hunger in his stomach and the hollow pit in his chest. Why hold onto it? For how long should he stretch out the last of his rations? “We *are* soulmates.”

“Figured as much.” Alex replies. When Bucky glances at him, he sees him smile at the ground. “The way he used to look at you, you know? Like you hung the moon. He was always different with you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Bucky bounces his knee, agitated. “I don’t know what that means.”

Alex's eyes meet his. He raises a hand as if trying to keep a wild animal docile. “I didn’t mean anything bad by it.” He hesitates, but decides to go on after a second. “I'm an artist, is all. I'm good at catching details others don’t.”

“Ain’t that a gift.” Bucky mutters with sarcasm. He nods again, resigned to address what they both know they're really talking about. He raises an eyebrow. “Where are you hiding the stakes then? Got yourself here a sinner to burn.”

“Aren't we all sinners, sir?” When Bucky locks eyes with him again, Alex smiles. “We've all sinned for love. Love of our country. Of what's right.” He taps the piece of wood on the ground. “Your sin is no worse than any of ours. Some wouldn’t call it a sin at all.”

Bucky purses his lips and gives him a nod. A knot loosens in his chest. He shifts until he sits on one edge of the wide stump, and Alex takes up his unsaid offer to plop down on the other side. They watch the sunset split into rays over the indigo sky as a cloud passes in front of the sun. Bucky takes out his remaining pack of cigarettes and picks one out at last. After a moment, he offers one to Alex too, can’t help it even though a part of him wants to keep them all. He’s infinitely glad when he’s declined.

“I could use a drink more.” Alex says with a wry grin that Bucky follows with his own.

“Don't we all?” He lights the cigarette and takes the first pull of its fleeting joy. They’re silent for a moment. Around them, the fatigued sounds of the camp ebb and flow. “Promised Buck we'd share one if we won.”

“Did he agree?”

“You know him.” Bucky grins, warm for a short second as the memory flashes in his mind. “Always up for a party.”

Alex lets out a quiet laugh. “I bet.” As they quiet down again, the cloud swims away from the sun's glow, leaving its blinding orange light unobscured above the camp. “You really don’t know if he made it?”

Bucky lifts the cigarette away from his lips and doesn’t say anything. He can feel Alex's eyes on him, but there’s nothing he can say. He doesn’t know. Gale's doors are closed. He could be anywhere, going through all sorts of horrors Bucky can’t even fathom, and Bucky wouldn’t even feel it. He never feels anything the way he’s supposed to, does he?

“Did he break your bond?” Alex asks, going for the jugular.

Bucky takes another pull of his cigarette. “How’d you know he did it and not me?” He tilts his head back and blows smoke towards the sky. It feels strange to talk about it. He wanted to, for so long, but it's so intimate that he couldn't - and now that he *is* talking about it, he just feels hollow. It’s easier to tell Alex than he thought. “It’s not broken. Just closed.”

Same thing. But Bucky doesn’t like the sound of the first word. A closed path can be opened again, but a shattered vase will always bear the marks of the damage even if it's glued back into one piece.

“Happened to one of my friends too. The girl's folks didn’t want a black son-in-law.” When Bucky looks at him, Alex shrugs. “Doors or walls?”

Bucky hesitates, but then he figures he has shared enough of his secrets already, why hold back on this one? “Doors.”

“That’s better. Or so I heard.” Alex gives Bucky a look of

encouragement. “He'll open them again, I’m sure.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Bucky says, turning back towards the sunset again. “I know what I -” He cuts himself off, ashamed of revealing so much vulnerability. It’s the camp's insanity, rattling around in his brain like an ant war. The old Bucky never would have come so close to telling an outsider how much he loved Gale. “Just gotta make it back and find him.”

Alex starts drawing in the wet soil again. “We'll make it back, Bucky.”

Bucky hums. They stay sitting on the stump in companionable silence until the sun sets.

Two weeks after Gale ran away, Bucky gets a splitting headache. His sight pulses, his temples throb, nausea bubbles in his throat even though he barely had anything to eat. They're forced through a long march again into a new camp, God knows where, and he thinks it's his exhaustion and the lack of water killing him, but the pain doesn’t let up no matter how much stale liquid he drinks. He fantasizes about scrounging up a pill of *anything* but they're all out of medicine, so he knows that kind of quick relief is just a daydream. If this is the first symptom of an illness that finally takes him out, he won't resist it.

Curled up close to Brady and Hambone in the dirt that night, he grits his teeth through it. It takes hours, but sleep drags him under, away from the agony at last.

He drifts around in shapeless dreamscapes, just muted sounds and shadows dancing on a river before he finds lucidity again. He tries to think of the log house and Alex's drawing. He wrestles with unstable silhouettes and falls, down through the air like a plane in nosedive until his feet find a faded carpet to stand on. Walls ripple around him until they solidify into a cozy room in Bournemouth with the sea whooshing just outside the window, peach-light sunshine catching on the lace curtains. When he looks outside, he sees a sandy cove, shielding his cottage from view, and it's nothing like the way it was in reality but every emotion it evokes is true to how Bucky felt that night when he lay on Gale's naked body and Gale kissed him like he never wanted to let him go, quiet under the caress of the salty summer

breeze. Deep down, the lucid part of his mind tells Bucky that he found a dream he can hold onto.

He goes to the door closing him off from the rest of the house but finds it locked. He tries the door handle again but it won't budge.

There's a loud bang on the other side, like a chair thrown at the wall.

For a second, he thinks it's another nightmare, but the sun burns all the warmer behind him. The seashell decoration hanging on the wall clinks cheerfully in the draft that blows between the open window and the gap that suddenly appears under the door.

Bucky hears a heavy object slamming into wood again, and this time, the door rattles. There's a cry of struggle on the other side, and the door shakes in its frame.

Bucky's heart starts pounding. He knows that voice. He knows the face that belongs to it, the hands, the smiles, the sense of peace. Is it only a nightmare, a trick of his sleeping mind or is it real?

"Gale!" He yells.

The door is rammed into again, and this time, something metallic breaks. The lock cracks, and the wood moves in its frame, opening an inch towards Bucky before it swings closed again. White plaster and shards litter the floor around it.

Breathing so fast he feels lightheaded, Bucky grabs the handle again. When he pulls, the door pushes the debris aside and opens.

Gale stands on the other side.

Bucky wakes up with a gasp.

Around him, the night is gloomy and cold, but in his chest, a spark of joy bursts. He barks a laugh, feels it spread in his heart like honey. His soulmate isn't dead. He's okay, he's alive, and he dreamwalked again. He tore that barrier down and came to Bucky. It's like their first night, but no disappointment follows - only pure joy.

"What?" Brady stirs beside him, alarmed at the way Bucky hyperventilates. He pats Bucky's chest. "You okay? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Bucky brushes Brady's hand aside, trying to calm down.

“Just a dream. I'm fine.”

It takes him forever to fall back asleep. Too many thoughts swirl in his head like a whirlwind, and he wants to drift off so desperately that it's his own need that keeps him awake and away from his happiness. But when his mind finally shuts off, his sleep comes in a heavy, welcoming wave.

He finds himself back in the bedroom of his cottage, a place that doesn’t exist in the real world but he built it himself for Gale, and excitement races through his veins at the thought of sharing it.

The door is flipped closed but he’s able to pull it open again, and this time, he’s ready to step over the threshold.

The space he enters is a barrack in Thorpe Abbotts. Two rows of beds, thin walls, pale English sunshine playing hide and seek outside behind scattered clouds. Gale is sitting on a bed in the same clothes he wore on the night he escaped, only much worse for wear. Mud covers him from head to toe.

Tear tracks draw clean lines in the dirt on his face. Down from his red-rimmed eyes to the too-sharp, thin lines of his jaw, and his lip trembles. His blue eyes look like water when they meet Bucky's.

“Are you gonna stick around this time?” He tries to joke, and Bucky huffs a wet laugh as he rushes to him and crashes into the circle of his waiting arms.

He squeezes him tight enough to hurt, but Gale just keeps kissing the parts of his face he’s able to reach, crying.

“You did it.” Bucky says, his voice hoarse. He pulls back to cup Gale's face and kisses him on his worried-pink lips. “How?”

"I needed a push."

One of Gale's hands cups his right. The other presses something into his palm. He looks down and finds a two-dollar bill in his hand, two of its corners bitten off.

“Your good luck charms were always one of your clues.” Gale says through a wobbly smile, his words hitching when he tries to calm his breath. “I made it back to Thorpe Abbotts, and they told me some mad bastard hadn’t let them ship my locker home.”

Bucky chuckles. “Mad indeed.”

“I found it in there.” Gale sniffles, and the sound is just as annoying as ever, but Bucky doesn’t mind it one bit. When Gale’s thumbs swipe over his face, he feels them smearing something wet on his skin, but he doesn’t realize that it's his tears until his sight blurs.

It doesn’t sharpen again.

The barrack disappears, the furniture fades away, the lights dim until there’s only darkness and a space without barriers. Nothing fills it but their souls, tangling their threads together. Bucky feels the sensation of Gale crawling all over him like he used to in the shelter of his attic, and they hold each other and share bittersweet kisses in the lightless embrace of the shadows in Gale's tired, tortured mind. Bucky feels the air tremble around him but he doesn’t talk about it. He just keeps Gale close and makes him repeat at least a dozen times that he made it to England. Because nothing else matters but that one fact. That he’s safe.

“Is this really you?” Bucky asks.

“Yes.” Gale mumbles against his cheek. “And I'll be here every night from now on, you hear me?” His fingers card through Bucky's hair. “It won't be long now, John, and we'll be together again.”

Bucky takes a deep breath of Gale's dream-scent and feels the grip of sorrow close around his heart again. “Don't count on it, Buck.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

It's finally here!!! 🥹🥹

This last chapter didn't come easy, partially due to external circumstances, but also because I struggled with writer's block - I think my mind didn't really want to let this story go. I put so much work into it that it's strange to wrap it up. This is my longest story on this account, and I think my third longest story ever, and that's counting the two fics I wrote when I was around sixteen and playing with fanfic for the first time.

This last chapter alone is 9.4k long. I hope it brings this story to a satisfying end. Thank you all for reading my work, I'm grateful to all of you! □ But special thanks to my biggest cheerleaders, Carnevol, hogans-heroes and swifty-fox. 💕 (By the way, Carnevol made a beautiful edit for this fic)

I'd love to hear your thoughts after this chapter. And if you have any questions or would like to chat, you can always send me an ask on Tumblr (avonne-writes).

Now, with all that said - please enjoy reading! □

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eerie quiet sleeps in the camp as Bucky sits with his back to a wooden pole, heavy bones and hunger-thin skin, ragged clothes, dirt in his pores. The dome of the night sky is vast and dark above him, but he finds comfort in its ink-black embrace. It's just like the dreams Gale has nowadays. If he lets his eyes unfocus, he can feel a weight on his lap, thighs bracketing his own, hands clutching at his clothes the way Gale's spirit holds him in his sleep.

With a heavy heart, he wonders if Gale worries about him on nights like this, when it's Bucky's turn to keep vigil for a few hours, to make sure the guards don't massacre them all in their sleep as the Allied troops creep ever closer. This is the last POW camp Bucky will ever be in, he's sure of that now. Soon, his captivity will be over, one way or another. He's ready for the final stretch. He doesn't know what comes after the finish line, but he feels a new will to fight because the end, at

last, is in sight. Every night when he's asleep, he clings to Gale's soul in that lightless, shapeless space Gale keeps dreaming up and tells him that each day brings them closer to each other now.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Bucky tenses, but it's just Alex. Not someone Bucky would have bet on being his friend, yet here they are. War shakes the odds in unexpected ways, doesn't it? You win some, you lose some. Bucky lost more than he won in the past two years, but he can't help but continue to hold out some hope for a final lucky streak. Some habits are impossible to shake.

In companionable silence, Alex sits back against the pole too, perpendicular to him. Their shoulders touch. Bucky doesn't pull away. They sit listening to the crickets and the rustling breeze for long minutes before Alex speaks.

"Sky's CAVU tonight."

Bucky scoffs. "That's why it's so goddamn cold."

Alex lets out a quiet chuckle. "Could be worse."

"Tell that to my hands."

"You should tuck them under your armpits."

Bucky grunts. He knows perfectly well that it would help, but then, he wouldn't be able to fidget with them. To drum the memories of pub songs on his knees or to squeeze the tips of his trembling fingers. He ran out of cigarettes, and in the absence of distraction, his craving for one makes him jittery. Is this how Gale felt after he finished the last of his sleeping pills? Did he hold onto the last one for as long as he could, like Bucky did with his last smoke? Does it feel good to be back on the pills, now that he's in Thorpe Abbotts? Bucky knows they're giving Gale something. Why else wouldn't his dreams ever form shapes for longer than a glimpse?

"When I was a kid, my ma used to tell me and my sister stories about the stars." Alex says idly, a nostalgic tone in his voice. "She didn't know any of the constellations. Made it all up." He snorts a laugh. "Trying to unlearn that was a bitch, I'll tell you that."

Bucky grins. "Buck already knew every star in the whole damn galaxy before basic training."

"Yeah?"

Bucky's eyes turn back to the sky, searching for the one distinct shape he tried to rename the Unicorn on one drunken night on an empty English field with Gale. There it is. The Big Dipper. His gaze traces its lines, and the gentle memory of that starry night drifts to the forefront of his mind. A fond smile pulls at the worn-out lines of his face. There aren't many things that get past the iron shield around Gale's heart, but he sure loves his stars.

"Did he tell you he wanted to be an astrophysicist?"

"Really? Never mentioned it." Alex muses. "He didn't share much, I realize."

That draws a wry chuckle out of Bucky. He's not surprised. Gale has always been deliberate about the cards he showed and the ones he kept so close to his chest that not a single ray of light could shine through the cracks. Bucky couldn't stand it sometimes, how it made him feel desperate and needy as he tried to pry those cards away from Gale's hands. But he's not sure where his own limits are now, if they still exist at all. He just wants to be with Gale. Looking up at the glittering canopy cradling the camp in peace, he daydreams about that night in England, when he first told Gale he loved him, and Gale told him he had wished on a shooting star. It seems impossible that Bucky would ever feel so carefree again.

It wasn't long after their altercation with those RAF pricks in the beginning of summer. Bucky was pleasantly drunk again, the pain and the guilt of all the men lost numbed in his chest as he and Gale lay in the grass on an abandoned field of wildflowers and dust. Gale deserved a better bed, Bucky thought. He deserved soft sheets and a mattress to sprawl on, but they couldn't get a weekend pass. Gale was a good sport about it though. He told Bucky he liked the smell of the earth and the whiffs of linden blossom in the air, and that he found the jeep uncomfortable anyway for what they wanted to do. So there they lay side by side under the stars, Bucky's trousers still unbuttoned and his shirt riding up his stomach, sweat soaked into his clothes. Gale's head rested on his right arm even as Bucky tried to gesture at the sky with both hands, his words stumbling over each other in his mouth.

"No, no, listen - that's… the Unicorn. See, there's the horn and -"

A firm hand cupped Bucky's face and turned his head to the right. Gale's mouth caught the drunken wisdom on his lips and pushed it back on his tongue gently, with an amused ebb and flow of pressure

until Bucky rolled onto his side. It was almost enough to make Bucky forget his point, but as soon as Gale pulled away, the idea came back. He turned his head towards the sky and pointed up, wide off his target.

“- and four legs. The tail, I don't know, there -”

Gale's lips were back on his within seconds, his hand pulling Bucky's down from the air and placing it on his own hip. His exhales came staccato against Bucky's skin as he laughed into their kiss.

“Stop kissing me.” Bucky put up a token protest, but then he went and dipped down to kiss Gale himself. Yes, the *Unicorn* was important, but other things drew his attention just as strongly, like the sweet buzz of Gale's hums on his lips or the warmth of Gale's skin where pleasure left it flushed.

“I'm not kissing you.” Gale mumbled and kissed him again. His fingers scratched at Bucky's nape, tugging at the short curls there in a way that sent quick, rolling shivers down Bucky's spine.

Bucky snickered like he only would after a night out in an English pub, with woozy joy. The world was swimming around him placidly and Gale was his raft, so he clung to him. He rubbed up and down Gale's side and nuzzled his lips because he could barely muster the coordination for a proper kiss that landed in the right place.

“What are you doing then?”

“Sparing my ears from your bullshit.”

Bucky didn’t feel offended at all. He flashed Gale a loopy grin and rolled on top of him. It was hard to see, but Gale’s eyes reflected some of the starlight. Bucky's hands fumbled their way up from Gale’s shoulders to his face and cradled his round cheeks.

“I love you.” Bucky said through his smile and kissed Gale again.

Gale stroked his back as though he was trying to soothe Bucky into silence, but he let the kiss linger until Bucky grew tired of holding his head up and dropped his forehead to Gale's collarbone.

Gale rubbed his ear. It was a touch he knew that Bucky found irritating because it tickled, but he did it anyway, probably to keep him from passing out. Sure enough, Bucky stirred and wrestled Gale’s hands to the ground, pinning his wrists there. The flexing of his

tendons under Bucky's palms felt satisfying.

“You can’t annoy me into taking it back.”

Gale laughed with his mouth closed, little high-pitched sounds trapped in his throat. “What was in that whiskey, huh?”

“Ice.” Bucky said dumbly, lowering his lips to Gale's forehead, then rubbing his own forehead against the spot he had just kissed.

“I love you.” He nudged Gale's nose with his. “Do you love me too?”

Gale tipped his chin up to capture Bucky's mouth and hummed. It sounded like an affirmation. In his intoxicated happiness, Bucky's muscles went pliant again, and he rolled over obediently when Gale pushed him to lie next to him again in the grass they flattened in the shape of two conjoined angels. They went quiet for a moment, just breathing together as the wind swept over the field.

Then Bucky felt Gale move, his weight pressing to Bucky's side and his forehead to Bucky's temple. His hand popped a few buttons on Bucky’s shirt and snuck inside. Warm over Bucky's undershirt, his thumb trapped the crosses and dog tags around Bucky's neck against Bucky's chest.

“Did you know that the first time we shared a dream, you scared me?” He whispered.

Bucky's mind fought the haze of alcohol to sober up. “I looked like a twig.”

Gale huffed a laugh. “That’s not what I mean. You scared me because you bailed as soon as you saw me.” His thumb swiped back and forth on Bucky’s chest, from his heart to where the crosses lay. “I thought you hated me, and I didn't know how to make it better. So I didn't sleep the next night.”

Something in Bucky's chest twitches. “You never told me.”

“I thought you knew.”

“I -” Even through his jumbled thoughts. Bucky knew he shouldn't tell Gale why he stayed away. “I couldn't sleep either that night.”

Gale breathed out. “Did I disappoint you that much?”

Yes, the truth lingered on Bucky’s tongue. He bit it back. “I expected a

girl.”

“I figured.” Gale said with resignation. “So I stayed up, snuck into our neighbour's backyard and sat in their tire swing the whole night, looking at the sky. And I saw a shooting star.”

Bucky raised his right hand to cover Gale's on his chest. He stared up at the constellations, walking the lines of their silhouettes, and wondered if Gale had found it soothing to name all those stars like imaginary friends once upon a time.

“I wished on it.” Gale continued. The admission sounded heavy in his voice. Another deep exhale caressed Bucky's cheek. “I wished you'd love me.”

“I love you.” Bucky repeated, but he could tell that there was a tension in Gale he hadn't resolved. “I'm your soulmate.”

That didn't help. Bucky was too drunk and too oblivious to find the right words to say.

“Biology is never a guarantee.” Gale said. “Blood doesn’t make a father love his son, does it? You don’t have to love your soulmate.”

He sounded sad, but when Bucky turned his head to look at him, his smile shifted the shadows in the dim light. He kissed Bucky again, indolent like the grass swaying in the early summer night. Cherishing something he had wanted for so long that the ache was laced into his bones.

“You feel that?” Alex jolts Bucky out of his reverie.

“What?” Bucky squeezes the fingers of his right hand, then the left to quell their shaking.

“The wind.” Alex sighs. “It’s warm.”

“So?”

“I thought you believed in signs.”

A jaded feeling coils in Bucky's stomach like nausea. “Hell knows if I do anymore.”

Alex hums. He doesn’t try to tell Bucky he shouldn't lose faith. He just

takes a deep breath, his shoulder warm against Bucky's. “We'll be free tomorrow. I can feel it.”

We're all just different angles of crazy at this point, Bucky thinks. It’s reassuring.

It turns out that Alex is off only by one day. Two days after their conversation, they’re liberated. The German guards are overpowered within minutes. Bucky climbs a flagpole and tears down the symbol of their long misery to replace it with the stars and stripes of home. He hugs the weathered wood that holds him high up above everyone's heads and, for a moment, he feels like he’s flying again.

When the weight of his relief finally crashes into him, it’s devastating. He imagined it many times over, the moment when he gets his freedom back. He thought he would be singing, dancing, drinking, or even just joking around and sharing stories with the soldiers who freed them, but he can’t. The weariness soaked into his spirit is too heavy to lift with skeletal arms and a mind fraying at the edges. It feels pointless to say anything, and now that the fellas don’t need to rely on him to keep their hopes up because *it’s over,* he goes quiet. Suddenly, sleep is the only thing he wants to do.

That night, he doesn’t go to Gale. He concentrates and dreams up his imaginary cottage on the coast again. The door, the representation of the barrier between their minds, still remains lodged in the dream-bedroom, but at least he’s able to unlock it now. He throws it open, then leaves the house to sit in the sand on the beach instead, watching the waves lap at the shore with rhythmic, languid whispers of peace. Sunshine stumbles on the grey water and its fringe of white foam. Pale purple meets blue on the horizon. He can’t tell if it’s dawn or sunset, or both at once, perhaps, a transition between mindstates. Between imprisonment and freedom.

When Gale enters his mind, he can feel it. He imagines he hears the creak of the door, then the whoosh of the air as the dream ripples around Gale’s soul, then the soft patter of footsteps. Bucky looks over his shoulder, his lips ready to smile, but he sees nothing. No one. Grains of sand shift in boot-sized patches on the ground, approaching him. Amusement tickles Bucky’s chest.

“Did they drag you out to the pub?” He snorts.

“No.” Gale says, a vague note of confusion in his tone. It’s not enough to make him ask why though, and Bucky wants him to reach that point, so he says nothing in response.

He can hear Gale sit next to him, even though he can’t see him. The rustle of clothes, then, a tug on the front of Bucky’s short-sleeved blue shirt. When Bucky raises his arm, a weight settles on his shoulder and something tightens around his waist. He lets his hand drop and sees it suspended in air, even though he feels the sensation of a coat under his palm and Gale’s back against his elbow. He laughs.

“Care to share the joke?” Gale’s voice grumbles drily.

“Remember what you used to do when the fellas got too drunk around you?”

There’s a pause. Gale’s hair tickles Bucky’s neck as they sit there hugging in silence. “I can’t remember anything.” Gale says eventually. His voice sounds peaceful. “What fellas?”

Bucky’s grin fades. Sometimes, a dream is just a dream, and lucidity remains beyond reach even during dreamwalking, as well as the weight of memories. Exhaustion can keep the mind in a sleep deeper than one's awareness. It used to happen to him more often than to Gale, because Gale had practiced lucidity as he grew up. But it did happen once in a while. The last time has been so long ago that Bucky isn’t sure if he should just let him stay unconscious of what he’s doing or make him aware of where he is, at the risk of waking him up. In the past, Gale always let him stay down deep and just enjoy oblivion, so Bucky did the same in return. But tonight, he wants to tell Gale that he’s free. That all the pain and fear is over now. He made it, and he’s going home. To Gale.

“You’re a pilot, Buck.” He starts, rubbing Gale’s invisible arm. “You and I serve in the Air Force.”

“I know.” Gale mumbles, even though he was blissfully unaware of it just a second ago. So far, so good, Bucky thinks.

“You don’t like loud, drunk crowds.”

“They’re out of control, John.”

Getting closer now… “You used to turn invisible in your dreams if

they annoyed you too much before you fell asleep."

"Invisible?" The weight of Gale's arm lifts from Bucky's stomach. He must be looking at it now, seeing himself as he is. "Oh -"

There's a gasp, then the transparent air holding Bucky's arm away from his body fills with textures and shapes, and the contours of Gale's body become visible again. Pushing away from Bucky, Gale sits back on his haunches in the sand and stares at his own hands until they look just as solid and pale pink as ever. But he doesn't stop there. As he watches his own fingers, the dust of purpling cold damage settles across his knuckles. Mud speckles his face, and dark shadows appear around his eyes, the skin sunken around their socket. His hair is limp and mousy-brown with dirt.

"Sorry about that." He gives Bucky a faint smile, assuming that Bucky's stricken expression is because he wasn't lucid for a moment there, and not because he looks like he's still forced to march between one stalag and the next every day. He looks around with an innocently mild expression. "Bournemouth?"

"Yeah."

"I like it."

Bucky hums. "You'd dream it better."

Gale's face falls. He looks down at his fingers and rubs the dirt off them as though he has just noticed it. "Don't count on it."

"We could try."

"No." Gale says with finality. He tugs at the old, ugly coat he's wearing. His voice sounds low and dejected. "Bucky, I can't even change."

"Just take it all off then." Bucky says, then winks. "I know you look good in your birthday suit."

At the unimpressed glance Gale shoots him, he chuckles. He reaches out and pushes his hands under Gale's lapels, peeling the fabric off his shoulders along with the dirt caked into it. It falls on the ground like a heavy chain. With its weight finally gone, Gale breathes more easily. It's like a catalyst. Suddenly, Gale's pulling at his holey sweater with frantic force, the buttons of his old shirt, then his trousers and boots, until he's left barefoot in the long johns he'd put on before they left

Stalag III. Clothes that he surely doesn't wear in the real world anymore, but something in him still clings to them as though he doesn't believe he's allowed anything better.

"Hey, Buck?" Bucky says as he watches him. "Do me a favour."

Gale's tired blue eyes meet his. "Sure."

"Get my locker from the orderly's hut if they've still got it." He waits until hope burns bright in Gale's gaze like a flare of light, then he grins wide. "And kick the fella out of the bed next to yours, will you?"

Gale tackles him into the sand and kisses him on the mouth.

In a way, climbing out of a fort in Thorpe Abbotts is such a deeply ingrained routine that it feels like Bucky has never even left. As though what he's coming back from was just a long, long mission. For a moment, the familiarity of it brings him a burst of joy he hasn't felt since Dye finished his 25th. A part of him still remembers how to be playful like he used to back then, and he pulls a prank on Gale, spurred on by the excitement that he's going to see him soon, that he'll hold him in his arms and check him over for new scars, see if his cheeks have filled in again, if his hair is all golden like it used to be.

The moment Bucky sees him in the pilot seat, smiling, it feels like time has restarted again, one and a half years after a phone call in London that stopped Bucky's clocks from turning.

His true liberation.

His soul feels like Gale's fort in his dream in Walla Walla. All engines feathered, gliding through his skies of euphoria.

"Oh, I'm back!" He shouts, and he means it in more ways than one.

He and Gale slip away from the rest of the men as soon as they find an opportunity. It's hard to sneak around in broad daylight, but Gale finds them a small corner in a storage room where the stacked shelves and the walls hide them from view, away from the door and the windows. It will do.

There, in the dim space where dust motes float in the air, the strings holding the stitches of Bucky's heart together snap loose. The blood of his sorrow floods his chest and steals the air from his lungs.

“Stone in my shoe.” Gale murmurs through a smile, tugging on Bucky’s collar with one hand. The other grips Bucky's elbow. “I missed you.”

Bucky nods. Here, in this stolen moment of privacy, he finds that he can’t look into Gale's eyes. He stares at Gale’s chest instead, his clean uniform. The healthy shade of pink at his throat, his smooth jaw. When Gale pulls him closer, he can smell his aftershave. The same heady scent after one and a half years. His love, safe again. Long-forgotten memories dance in the blurry, watery lights that suddenly flood his sight. His inhales stutter. Each one comes harder than the one before. His throat is gripped by the illusion of a hand that feels like his own, and the warmth spilling from his eyes and down his cheeks is like the blood in his chest overflowing, trickling out of his body in salty rivulets.

“John.” Gale says as though something is breaking in him. His ever-cold hands cup Bucky's cheeks, and his thumbs swipe through the flood of pain there, but the tears continue to fall.

Bucky's eyes close. His head bows forward until their foreheads touch, and his hands find Gale’s waist. At the end of his long journey, he’s finally home. Gale holds his head in place and gives him a soft kiss. His lips against Bucky's are a whispered *welcome back,* his sigh a shaky *missed you.* It doesn’t feel like their first kiss in four months, but their last given to the past one and a half years. Their bodies embrace each other as though they had never forgotten how to be whole together, and the way Gale kisses him now is just the universe righting itself after all those months of spinning miserably out of kilter. Gale's arms wrap around his back, holding him so carefully that Bucky’s heart pumps more pain into his ribcage to make space for all the love he can't contain in it.

When he pulls away, he drops his head to Gale's shoulder and presses his face to Gale's warm neck. In the fragrant darkness there, he can pretend they're in the log house, and he doesn’t have to wake up just yet. They hold each other until he has no more tears left.

Being back in Thorpe Abbotts is nothing like Bucky imagined. He knew he had changed. He knew he wouldn't be the life of the party anymore and that none of the new faces would know him or would have even heard of him. But what he didn't expect is that despite all this, he'd feel that he *should* return to the way he used to be. In the stalag, waiting, hoping to survive and be free again, he didn't realize that he would be shackled not only by grief for the loss of his old self but by shame at his failure to return to it.

To the men who had known him before he went down, he's a ghost returned to life - but he can't fit into his living skin anymore. He'll continue to carry the touch of death for the rest of his life.

He can see the disappointment in their faces. Where they expect him to laugh, heartily from his belly like a man too cocksure to hide his joy, he can only smile now. Wryly, as if there was a bitter aftertaste lingering on his tongue no matter how sweet the joke lands in his throat. The ones who never knew him tense up in his presence more in fear than out of the excitement of meeting a revered idol, and he thinks about easing their mood with a playful quip or a friendly touch, but he can't muster the care. Let them see him as Major Egan. Harrowed officer, not one of them anymore. Good. For the way he feels now, *Bucky* might not have made it out of Germany at all.

No one asks about the camp, which is for the better. There's nothing to be said about it that isn't said by the hollow light in the eyes of those who returned.

But good food, rest and safety do wonders as well. It's hard to tell when the face in the mirror still looks like a skeleton reminiscent of Bucky's father, but he does see it in the boys. How their cheeks regain colour and their smiles lose their edge. How, after a few days, they start eating with less voracious bites, and how they don't sit so closely huddled together anymore. The grime washes off their skin and life returns in its wake.

In Bucky's eyes, the best change of all is that Gale sleeps. Peacefully, like a child, with his hands tucked under his pillow.

On his own, without pills. Bucky thought that the reason behind the constant pitch black dreams was some kind of medication, but when he asks Gale about it, Gale reveals that it's his own choice not to build a dreamscape. He never told the doctors in England about what he

went through.

“It’s my business, John.” He tells Bucky one afternoon as they stand leaning against the sunlit wall of the Tower. Their crispy clean uniforms feel warm in the bright light. Between Gale’s lips, a toothpick again. He moves it from one corner to the other. His eyelashes cast long shadows as he stares into the distance where another mercy mission is about to take off. “Ain’t for them to know. Another goddamn look of pity and I'm gonna lose it.”

“Wouldn’t that be a sight?” Bucky snorts. He wants to throw his arm around Gale’s shoulders but he can’t find the strength to do it. He toes idly at a daisy in the tuft of grass that broke through the gaps in the concrete. “Well, if you're not on those pills, we can try doing things like we used to.”

Gale fiddles with the box of toothpicks in his hands. “Do you still want to?”

His voice sounds strange, so Bucky turns his head to look at him, but Gale keeps his gaze on the ground. They're not talking about dreams anymore, Bucky realizes. “Of course I want to.”

“Won't be the same.”

“Nothing’s the same.”

Uncertainty shimmers in Gale's blue eyes when they meet his. There’s nothing else Bucky can say, so he stays silent, but his arm moves until it rests around Gale’s shoulders. Bones on bones.

But something in that conversation lodges itself in Gale's mind and grows roots, because that night, their shared dream crashes like a trainwreck that Bucky is helpless to stop.

It starts innocently enough. Bucky's lucidity returns in his own dream first. He’s climbing the wooden steps leading down to the beach. He doesn't know the reason why he’s going up but he knows he has to get there as fast as possible, so he pushes his thighs until they burn, but the more distance he clears, the longer the staircase grows. At one point, he stops, and sees that the cottage on the beach is just a speck on terrain that looks like he’s watching it from a B-17. An urgent feeling tells him he needs to go back to the house, so he starts going back down, but the staircase never ends.

Cornflowers and daisies grow out of the gaps in the wood or where the steps meet the dirt. The longer Bucky's journey down takes, the more densely they pop up by his feet.

“I know, Buck, I know. Shit.” Bucky swears as he almost trips down on an overgrown root. He would have broken his neck in the fall. “I'm coming.”

It's only then that he remembers that he’s in a dream. He doesn’t have to confine himself to the laws of physics, and Gale’s clues will take him to Gale anyway if he grabs them. With a rush of relief, he bends down and plucks a handful of cornflowers from around his shoes, then thinks of Gale.

He feels the pull of it in his navel as he’s snapped out of his dream, past the battered frame of the door Gale bashed open, and into Gale's dream.

This time, it’s not the swirling, lukewarm darkness that greets him, but green grass and a river that sings to him like an old friend. Sunshine kisses his skin and sweeps over the dreamscape, happiness chased by the shadows of the clouds that drift across Gale’s blue skies. In the distance, the mountain stands tall and proud. The trees in the forest bow gently in the wind as if to welcome Bucky back.

Gale is sitting on the hill overlooking their old log house, with his arms resting on his pulled-up knees. There’s a piece of grass sticking out of his mouth, and he’s in denim trousers and cowboy boots again, shirtless in the warm summer weather. Bucky spots a heap of dirty stalag clothes behind him, but he ignores it, as well as the ashen colour of Gale's hair, because his joy overpowers every other emotion he feels.

He laughs, jogging up to Gale. Every breath fills his lungs with the familiar, crispy peace of the mountain air. He throws himself down on the ground next to Gale and wraps his arms around him, kissing his cheek.

But Gale doesn’t respond with the same enthusiasm. He throws the blade of grass from his mouth away and grips Bucky's shirt with hands so desperate that the seams strain audibly from the force.

“Can we go now? To your beach?” Gale whispers, his voice full of fear.

Bucky's smile vanishes. He looks around but the landscape seems

comforting as ever. There's no laundry on the drying lines and there's smoke trailing out of the log house, now that he's looking at it, but otherwise, every corner of the dream feels like home. But if something is distressing Gale, they're not going to stay.

"Yeah. Let's go." He pulls Gale to his shaky feet.

They only take a few steps before Gale stills and his body grows rigid next to Bucky's.

"It's too late." He says in a voice that sounds like the air rushing out of a cut oxygen line.

That's when Bucky sees it. One of the clouds turns grey from white and starts unraveling at the edges until it forms a spiral that swirls and swirls in place. Around it, the sky ripples, and more pieces of it break off to begin pulsating and rotating at an increasing speed that matches Gale's panicked breathing. Like an infection, the fragmenting reaches the mountain, and as soon as it claims the peak, it escalates. The entire landscape flickers and breaks into checkerboard patterns as if they were a breakout of hives. Everything is moving and pulsing in different rhythms and different directions. Nausea rises in Bucky's throat.

He clutches at Gale's hand and tries to imagine his own dreams to snap them out of there, but he has never been good at maintaining focus, and the fear exhaled by the crumbling dreamscape of Gale's mind is strong enough to lock him in place.

"Gale!" He raises his voice, trying to turn Gale's head to face him. Gale's eyes are wide, his skin white as a sheet. Cold sweat breaks out on his brow. "You're dreaming, it's not real! It's *not real!"*

But Gale doesn't listen to him, and the sickness flares up. A black funnel opens up in the grass and starts feeding on the dreamscape, gaining size with every inch of land it consumes. It's going to suck them in as well if they don't move, but Gale's feet are rooted to the spot.

"You need to wake up!" Bucky snaps at him.

But Gale just squeezes his eyes shut and the funnel swallows them both.

The space they end up in is cold, dark and utterly silent. It takes Bucky a moment to orient himself, but he spots a ray of light coming

in through a gap that resembles the space between a door and the floor. Gale doesn't breathe at all as they hold each other, waiting for something to happen.

The sound of boots on concrete comes from the direction of the door.

Gale bursts into tears in his dream. "I don't want it, I don't, I don't -"

The ray of light is broken by a shadow, and Gale gasps. He grips Bucky's arms so tight that in the real world, they would bruise. "You're not supposed to be here."

A forceful shove hits Bucky's chest, and Bucky wakes up in his bed in the barrack.

"Fuck." He mutters and pushes himself off the mattress.

It's too dark to see but Gale is in the bed next to his, and he would be able to navigate through the space between them even if Gale was on the other end of the building. He makes his way to him as fast as possible, and he breathes a sigh of relief when his hand comes into contact with a warm shoulder.

Gale hyperventilates but doesn't stir awake until Bucky shakes him.

At first, for a moment, he panics and tries to push Bucky away, but he goes limp when Bucky's quiet shushing registers in his brain. When Bucky folds over him and pulls him into an embrace, the salt of his sweat and tears smear on Bucky's lips with the soothing kiss he presses to Gale's cheek. The harsh contrast with the kiss he gave Gale in his dream breaks Bucky's heart.

"It was just a nightmare." He murmurs into Gale's ear. "Just a nightmare."

Gale makes a gasping sound and his arms tighten around Bucky. "Mesca-dream."

"I know." Bucky says somberly. "Need a bucket?"

Gale takes a few deep breaths, then shakes his head. His right hand slides up to Bucky's nape and squeezes. His breathing starts to slow down.

"You okay?" Bucky asks. He can feel Gale nod, and his hand slips to Bucky's neck, stroking mindlessly. Bucky's hands run up and down

Gale's sides until he feels like Gale is calm enough to let go. He presses a soundless kiss to Gale's temple, then pulls away. "Give me a second."

He walks back to his own bunk quietly and grabs the old sheepskin jacket that Jack gave back to him upon his return. Bucky hasn't worn it since. He couldn't bring himself to put it on. But it's his all the same. A keepsake from easier times. To Gale, it won't be a reminder of Münster, but of Texas and Nebraska. Of good-natured teasing and nights spent cuddling in empty forts, drunk on love. It will be a comfort, not a sign of grief.

Bucky takes the jacket, tiptoes back to Gale's bed and drapes it over Gale. The new boys bunking with them won't know the significance of it, the old ones won't care. He feels safe to leave it with Gale for the night, a replacement for the embrace of his own body that he can't risk to be seen.

Gale snakes an arm out of his cocoon and holds Bucky's hand as Bucky sits on the mattress by his hip. "Did you have to choose this hideous thing?"

Bucky chuckles soundlessly through his nose. "Admit it, you love it."

Freeing his other hand to stroke Bucky's cheek, Gale smiles. It's audible in his voice. "I might."

When their war ends with a radio broadcast, catharsis eludes Bucky just like it did when he was freed from captivity. It's a fleeting thing. One moment, it sits on the back of his hand, but it flits away as soon as he turns his palm to grasp it. He feels hollow and tired again. The war has given him purpose for so long that he can't remember what it was like to function without it, and he doesn't know what comes next.

Some strange twist of an emotion turns the celebration that erupts around him into overwhelming cacophony, and he wants nothing to

do with the boys cheering at the top of their lungs, with the dancing, the drinking, the songs. His eyes find Gale's in the crowd, and Gale gives him a smile of understanding. Bucky knows all too well now what drives a man to turn invisible in his dreams after a night out.

They slip away together. They don't need to discuss it. Bucky sees Gale walk out, and he follows. He knows they won't be missed. The fellas are more used to them not being there than they're to their presence. A few perfunctory handshakes, a clap to one or two men's back, and Bucky has done enough to earn his leave. He exits the Officers' Club like the shadow he feels he is. He leaves them to their joy and to the celebration of their lives, and goes to find the way to Gale instead.

They end up sitting side by side on the roof of the Control Tower, watching the makeshift firework show the ground crews throw using flares. Sizzling, whistling lights explode on the night sky. It reminds Bucky of Gale's first mission. The green light, then the endless wait until, at last, Gale's fort returned to base.

"You okay?" Gale breaks the silence when the long minutes of it begin to stretch into an hour. Bonfires burn where the men horse around in drunken celebration.

Bucky hums, nodding at the flask in his hands. He forgot to take it with him on the Münster raid, but he's glad for that now. The familiarity of that small piece of metal warms him. He always gets attached too deeply, doesn't he?

When Gale's hand brushes his, he startles. He looks up and finds Gale watching him with knowing eyes. Colourful lights flash on his face as more flares are shot in the dark.

"You promised me a drink if we won." Gale says.

Bucky's smile comes slowly, but when it does, it's rooted in the strings of his heart. "I did, didn't I?"

He holds the flask out and Gale takes it. Their fingers touch. Their eyes never break contact while Gale raises it to his soft lips and takes a sip. His jaw tenses at the unfamiliar burn as he swallows, but he doesn't cough or wince, and something about that makes Bucky grin. He takes the flask back and drinks. He imagines he can taste the sweetness of Gale's mouth on the neck of it.

"So. This is it." He sighs.

“This is it.” Gale echoes. There’s a mellow expression on his face that makes Bucky feel more content too.

“What’s the move now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. You ain’t a betting man. I know you've got a plan.”

Gale's pause is long, but Bucky can tell that he’s going to answer, so he waits, and eventually, Gale opens his mouth again. “I want to study.”

Bucky nods. A spark of joy lights up in his chest. He loves how smart Gale is, always has - and with the new bill, Gale will finally be able to afford doing something with it. “You should.”

“But I don’t know where.”

Bucky slouches down in his seat a bit more. He imagines his Gale at the most prestigious of colleges, sweeping those green, naive academic kids off their feet with his brains and his hard-earned confidence, and he can’t help but smile. “Where do you wanna go?”

“Wherever you go.”

Bucky looks at Gale in the dark, and Gale stares right back at him. For a moment, he’s seventeen again and full of hope that his love loves him back, and it almost feels like a second chance to say the right thing at the right time. Bucky's heart races with the excitement of it. “What are you saying, Buck, you gonna make an honest man out of me?”

“As honest as I can.” Gale replies, utterly serious. “If you want it too.”

Another flare bursts in the sky. Green light burns over the warmth of the bonfires.

Bucky nods. “I do.”

They stay there drinking and sharing the quiet for a long time, just listening to the boys sing and laugh in joy. Bucky feels better already,

knowing that no matter what comes next, they'll be together. A slow, gently rising happiness starts to spread in his chest and leaves him loose-limbed from contentment. When he and Gale decide to leave their vantage point and head back to the barracks at last, he realizes that he doesn't need any catharsis to make this one of the happiest days of his life.

The Tower is deserted inside. Normally, there would be personnel bustling around at all times, but no one thought to stay around manning the weather room on this magical night. The war of their lifetime is over - no one cares if their stations are abandoned for a few hours. As they pass the empty weather room, Bucky feels Gale's hand slip into his and pull.

"Hey." Gale says through a smile as he tugs Bucky into the room. "Come here."

It's a small space. Just two tables, some equipment, several boards with scribbled weather data on the walls, and a bunk bed in the corner for the fellas who'd be here to man the place around the clock if it wasn't for the extraordinary day. They might come back anytime. But it feels like a lucky night. Their lucky night. When Gale closes the door behind them and kisses him in the middle of the room, Bucky puts all caution aside and kisses him back with a hunger he hasn't felt in two years.

Their fumbling hands tug each other's jacket off, and the garments land on the floor with a rustle of fabric, ignored. Their ties follow. Gale makes a noise in the back of his throat and pushes eagerness into the kiss with a tilt of his chin, licking into Bucky's mouth. Alcohol is an unfamiliar taste on his tongue but feels all the sweeter for it. Bucky sucks on that taste, then gasps into the warmth of Gale's mouth when Gale guides him into a table with his hands firm on Bucky's hips.

Bucky perches on it and spreads his legs for Gale to fit right there in their cradle, his fingers tugging on Gale's hair as Gale's growing hardness rubs against his. He tilts his hips up, and Gale grinds down to make them both hum at the delight of it. His hands slip to the small of Bucky's back to keep him like that and he keeps rocking in small circles as they make out in the dark. The table creaks rhythmically under their weight. It's the only noise that breaks up the muted murmur of the celebrations outside and the soft, damp sounds of their kisses.

When Bucky tips his head back, Gale stops rolling his hips and kisses the exposed underside of his jaw.

“Weather report?” He asks as he undoes Bucky's belt and shifts one of his hands to Bucky's fly.

Bucky laughs. His gaze meets the mischief in Gale's eyes, clear even in the dim light that comes in through the small windows that face away from the bonfires. He licks his lips.

“It seems that we have, uh, hot temperatures tonight. Weather pressure could be higher.” Bucky starts. His exhale leaves him in a rush when Gale obliges him, squeezing him tighter through his trousers. His thumb rubs at the head of Bucky's cock so tantalizingly that Bucky feels dampness soaking into his underwear. “There’s a… cumulonimbus rising to uh, 40,000 feet. High chance of precipitation.”

When Gale laughs, the corners of his eyes crinkle with it, and he makes those high-pitched sounds of amusement in his throat that Bucky hasn't heard in so long that he thought he made them up. When he grins and wraps his arms around Gale's waist, Gale kisses him again. He curls his arms around Bucky's neck, combs through his curls, then peppers kisses all over the left side of his face, up to his temple then back down to his mouth. When their lips meet and part with a soft sound, Gale sighs as though the weight of the world has just dropped from his shoulders.

“I love you, John.” He says.

Bucky's happiness rushes through his skipped heartbeat, and a love calmer than the sky above the clouds flows through his veins. He captures Gale’s chin with his fingers, using his forefinger to stroke his burning cheek. “Is that the whiskey talking?”

“I didn't have that much.”

“Hm, but you're a lightweight.”

“I'm no such thing.”

Bucky smiles and leans in to kiss Gale again. “I love you so much.”

Gale drags his fingertips down Bucky's spine. “I love you too.”

This time, when his hand wanders to Bucky’s fly, it doesn’t stop there.

His fingers push through the folds of Bucky's clothes and pull his cock out through the gap. The heat of Bucky's body has warmed them up enough that they feel pleasant even on Bucky's overheated, sensitive skin as they spread precome over his length and start pulling him off in lazy strokes. Bucky pushes his thighs against Gale's legs to trap him in place and draws him close to mouth at his neck, where he knows that every exhale on damp skin sends shivers down to Gale's hips. His hands work through the buttons of Gale's uniform.

When he bites the spot above Gale's collarbone and doesn't let go, Gale stills, panting through his nose as wave after wave of pleasure shudders through him. He leans his head against Bucky's.

"I think there's a first aid kit in one of those cabinets." He mumbles.

"Yeah?" Bucky breathes against the skin he has just marked with his lips. He kisses a path up to Gale's face, careful not to bruise where the clothes won't cover it. He kisses the shell of Gale's ear. "Give or take?"

Gale moves his fist over Bucky's cock just once before he stops again. "Take."

It consumes all of Bucky's restraints not to whine at that. "God. We haven't had sex like that in twenty months."

It earns him a breathless laugh. "Still keeping count?"

"Always."

Gale shakes his head and tries to step away. When Bucky doesn't let him, he folds back in against the table and gives in to the temptation of another minute of kissing and rolling their hips together. The material of his trousers is just the right side of rough against Bucky's cock. He pulls Gale in tighter and Gale bucks against him. The table groans in protest, pushed back half an inch.

"Better not break this thing." Gale says and drags Bucky back to his feet.

"Good point." Bucky runs a hand through his hair, taking a deep breath to calm himself. "Go get that kit."

Wordlessly, Gale steps away from him to root through the cabinets. In the meantime, in a blink of clarity, Bucky moves the table to barricade the door.

“Just in case.” He says awkwardly when Gale gives him a questioning look.

With their momentum broken, their insecurities creep back in. Bucky knows he should save them time and take his clothes off but he stops once he’s half-naked and can’t bring himself to pull his trousers off. The sight of his own torso puts a dent in his confidence. They're both thinner than they should be but Gale escaped the slow starvation in the stalag a few weeks earlier, so he's in better shape. He looks attractive even if Bucky can see the lines of his ribs and has less meat to grab if he touches Gale’s ass. But Bucky doesn’t know if the sight of his body could still arouse Gale in this state or if it’s better not to even try to avoid disappointment.

Sitting at the edge of the lower bunk in the corner, he waits for Gale to come back with the vaseline. When he does, he pushes Bucky on his back and climbs over him. He gives Bucky the small jar to hold while he shucks his clothes.

“Are you nervous?” He asks, hovering half-naked over Bucky, his trousers undone.

“Why would I be nervous?” Bucky tries to cover his shaky exhale, but he fails when Gale leans down and presses kisses to the lines of his chest, up to the juncture of his neck.

“I'm nervous too.” Gale confesses quietly. “Twenty months is a long time.”

The fears in Bucky's chest begin to ease. It's reassuring that he’s not alone in this. That just like when they first started, they can figure it out together. He cups Gale’s cheeks and strokes his thumbs over the scars there.

“I want you just as much as I did two years ago.”

Gale takes a deep breath and gives him a smile. “Let’s get on with it then. We have a lot to make up for.”

Bucky grins. “That we do.”

Some things come back quickly, as easy as breathing. Their naked bodies, tangled with each other. Rolling Gale on his back and parting his thighs, pushing vaseline-slick fingers into him and soaking up the

way desire changes his voice when those fingers move inside him. Gale's fingers on Bucky's nipples, rubbing in circles and teasing between his knuckles as they kiss and rock against each other. Gale's hand between their stomachs, holding their cocks together.

But there are things that don't go as smoothly, that take effort and adjustment from them both. Gale is so tight and so nervous that it takes a few tries before Bucky is able to sink in at all, and it still hurts, he can tell. He wants to stop, but Gale's palms press to his lower back and urge him to continue. He starts rocking gently but the frown on Gale's face only deepens, and his teeth worry at his lip restlessly.

"Push back into it." Bucky whispers.

"It's the angle." Gale hisses, so they put a pillow under him.

On the next thrust in, the noise he makes sounds better, and he moves his hands from Bucky's back to his head to pull him into a kiss.

Their dog tags clink together as Bucky makes love to him for the first time in two years. With their foreheads pressed together and their lips brushing as he thrusts in deep and knocks quiet gasps from Gale's mouth. Their eyes are closed, and they don't talk. They only need to feel. Outside, a flare still lights up every now and then, but the base is starting to get quieter as the men's rush of joy settles into a slower flow. Only now does the true meaning of it all reach Bucky's mind, here, in Gale's arms - that he gets to go home and build a life with his soulmate, where they can be together like this every day, where he can kiss Gale in Gale's bed, *their bed,* and doesn't have to worry about getting shot by a Kraut for it.

When he snaps his hips forward and grinds down, Gale makes a needy noise and nips Bucky's lip.

"Good?" Bucky pants, doing it again.

Gale looks at him with half-lidded eyes and moves a hand between them again. "So good it hurts."

Still weak from his captivity, Bucky's arms start trembling from holding himself up, but he keeps going, hardly able to stand the pleasure. His thrusts go easy now, slick and steady, as Gale relaxes into it, and the bed shakes with them. The heady smell of sweat and sex fills his nose, and Gale's breathing keeps hitching with the moans he tries to swallow.

“Fuck, I missed this so much.” Bucky grunts and loses himself to it, his face tucked into Gale's sweaty neck and stars behind his closed eyes. He knows that Gale likes it like this, mindless in the rush to the peak, and it feels good to let go and just chase the catharsis.

He mouths his desire into Gale's skin. “Oh, doll.”

“John.” Gale moans, and he goes so tight that all the nerves in Bucky's stomach light up in pleasure as he pushes them both into gasping, messy rapture.

They don’t have much time left when it's over, but they risk a few minutes of afterglow. Bucky shifts to lie on his side and rests his head on Gale’s chest, listening to his pounding heart slow and his breathing even out. He strokes his wide palm over Gale’s thighs where his bones bruised them, then the jut of his hips, the mess on his stomach, then his side, where Gale’s slender hand captures his hand and keeps it still.

Suddenly, Bucky doesn’t feel tired at all. The emotional relief he missed after the broadcast seems to slam into him now, in the wake of his bliss, and he catches himself smiling at nothing. He knows that the hollowness and the sorrow will come back. But it's good to remember how to feel alive.

Gale's free hand strokes Bucky's hair, then cups the back of his head. “Do you think you could still ride a horse?”

Bucky props his chin up on Gale’s chest to give him an amused glance. “I could ride you.”

Gale tugs at his ear. “A horse.”

Bucky swats Gale’s hand away from his head, then changes his mind immediately and pulls it back to kiss his palm. “An old one.”

Gale snickers. “An old one?”

“Too weary to buck.”

With a soft smile, Gale cups his face. “I promised Marge I'd visit her in Wyoming when all this was over.”

“It’s over.”

Gale hums. He runs his thumb over the barely-there scar that mars the bridge of Bucky's nose. "You know, there's an abandoned cabin in the mountains that you can only visit on horseback. My uncle lost it on poker a couple years back. But I've still got a key. She doesn't live far from there."

Bucky pushes himself up on his elbows to lean closer to Gale's face. Gale looks up at him with hope bright in his eyes.

"I wanted to take you there. Always have. Just didn't know how to ask." Gale looks away, then back to Bucky's eyes. "Will you come with me?"

"I will." Bucky nods and gives him a kiss. "And if you want -" He whispers into Gale's cheek. "- I will learn how to dream it for you."

Gale hugs him tight, and they breathe together as the sounds of singing and cheers start up again outside. If Bucky closes his eyes, he can smell the mountain air on Gale's skin. The rush of Gale's pulse is like a river, the tickling brush of his hair the grass against Bucky's bare body. His warmth, the sunshine. And in his arms, he holds Gale's soul, bright and whole - and his.

Chapter End Notes

A drabble about John and Gale 40 years in the future

End Notes

If anyone wants to chat, my Tumblr is avonne-writes

Works inspired by this one

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